INDEPENDENT INFORMATION FOR SMART CONSUMERS

choice

DEC 2007/JAN 2008 CHOICE.COM.AU

Unsafe toys on sale
Failed! Nearly half the toys CHOICE tested had parts that could choke a child.

Handheld GPS
Get where you want to go in the bush — and retrace your steps if you need to.

On test

- Gas barbecues
- Smart phones
- Wine fridges
- Camcorders
- Handheld GPS
- MP3 players
- 80 cm LCD televisions

2007 Shonky Awards

Announcing the biggest lemons of the year! And the gongs go to...

Sniffing out the facts on the fake perfume industry

January sales time: know your shopping rights

So your kid wants a bodyboard for summer?

194 PRODUCTS RATED!

CHOICE taste tests: Top sparkling wines and designer chips for your Christmas festivities

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How CHOICE helps you. CHOICE gives you the power to choose the very best goods and services, and avoid the worst. Because we pay full price for the products we test, we can remain 100% independent. We don't take advertising and we don't accept freebies from industry — our only aim is to give consumers the best possible information about buying products and services. Our income is only from subscriptions to our magazines and choice.com.au, and from other services we supply for the benefit of consumers. We're not a government body and we don't receive government funding.

We have laboratories in Marrickville, Sydney, that test everything from juicers to plasma TVs, coffee grinders to MP3 players and air conditioners. We test hundreds of products every year. There's no hidden agenda to our testing — we simply road-test products so that consumers like you don't get ripped off. CHOICE ratings are based on lab tests, expert assessments and consumer surveys.

CHOICE also has staff who research a wide range of consumer services — everything from the financial industry to the organic food business, supermarket practices to drug companies and pharmacies. They reveal the truth behind the facts and figures, and investigate quality and claims.

CHOICE has also always campaigned about consumer goods and services that affect your life. We lobby government and regulators on behalf of all consumers in Australia. CHOICE was established in 1959 and is a not-for-profit, non-party-political organisation.

CHOICE Best Buy

BEST BUY

CHOICE nominates a product as a Best Buy if it delivers high quality at a comparatively low price. Not every test report has a Best Buy.

CHOICE Shopper

CHOICE SHOPPER BEST VALUE

Call 1300 360 655. All you need is the model name and number you want to buy, the price you want to beat, and your CHOICE subscriber number. CHOICE Shopper is available to personal subscribers only.

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Personal subscription 1 year $78, 2 years $145.
Company/institution 1 year $125, 2 years $239.
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On test

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CHOICEextra.com.au

This is a free website for CHOICE magazine subscribers. It's an index of articles going back to Jan/Feb 2002, with links to PDFs so that you can read many of them immediately. You log in with your subscriber number, which is above your name on the mailing label that comes with the magazine.

Comment

Dangerous products

The recent contamination of the toy Bindeez potently illustrates the need for reform of Australia's product safety regime.

Following the hospitalisation of three children in NSW and Queensland, NSW Fair Trading immediately withdrew the toy. Other states and territories followed suit with the exception of Victoria, which deferred a decision for 24 hours. So, for a short period, Bindeez was subject to recall and dire warnings in Albury yet was freely available across the border in Wodonga. And this is not the first time such a situation has been allowed to develop.

Australian consumers expect dangerous products — particularly for children — would simply not be for sale. But this country's inadequate product safety system doesn't deliver that result.

Consumer product safety is a hodge-podge of voluntary and mandatory state and federal standards. The ACCC and fair trading bodies all have a role. While those bodies conduct random tests, for the most part manufacturers themselves decide whether their products are safe.

Of the children's products CHOICE has tested for safety in the last six years, a staggering 33% failed basic safety standards. This level of failure isn't confined to kids' products. In a 2006 report, the Productivity Commission estimated that product design, faults or misuse led to about 750 deaths and tens of thousands of injuries each year.

The case for coherent, nationalised laws and consistent enforcement is overwhelming. But any national enforcement system must be able to respond to regionally specific product safety issues. Any such system needs sufficient resources and a new, purpose-specific agency, or a specific unit within the ACCC.

The Productivity Commission reviewed product safety early last year. It supported many of the key changes recommended by CHOICE. But we're still waiting for action to bring Australia's product safety regime up to the standard that exists in other parts of the world.

Finally, I'd like to wish you all a happy and safe Christmas and New Year, and remind you that this issue of CHOICE covers December and January. You'll receive your next issue in late January or early February next year.

Anny Friis
Editorial Director

+ SUSTAINABLE LIVING

The more we shop, the more we pollute

New research suggests that retail therapy isn't therapeutic for the planet.

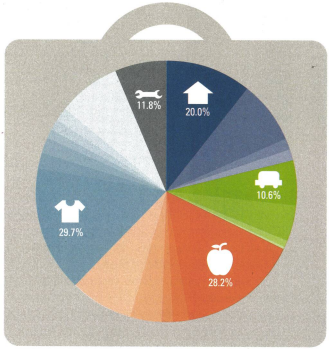


ILLUSTRATION: CYNTHIA WEE

Greenhouse pollution by sector

Household use	**20.0%**
Electricity	14.7%
Gas, coal, oil, firewood	2.8%
Other household	2.5%
Transport	**10.6%**
Petrol	8.6%
Public transport	1.3%
Air travel	0.7%
Food	**28.2%**
Beef	3.8%
Dairy	2.4%
Restaurants	7.5%
Other food	14.5%
Goods and services	**29.7%**
Clothing	3.4%
Furniture and appliances	3.7%
Books and magazines	2.3%
Tobacco and alcohol	2.7%
Personal care	2.9%
Other goods and services	14.7%
Construction and renovations	**11.8%**

Wealthier suburbs have a much greater impact on the environment because the residents buy more products and services.

Research by the Australian Conservation Foundation (ACF) recently revealed that what we buy causes more greenhouse pollution than electricity in our homes or driving our cars. "Use of electricity in the home accounts for just 15% of the greenhouse pollution each of us creates," says the ACF report. "The majority is created indirectly from the production and transportation of all the things we're buying."

The ACF's 'Consumption Atlas' also shows that wealthy suburbs of Australia have a much greater environmental impact in terms of greenhouse pollution, water consumption and land degradation than poorer areas, because the residents buy more products and services.

According to the atlas, which was developed with the University of Sydney, the food we eat creates the biggest impact (see the pie chart, above). Food accounts for 28% of our greenhouse emissions, 46% of our water use and 49% of our land footprint. Beef and dairy products have a particularly large effect due to the grazing land and water needed for growing cattle feed.

Buying goods such as clothes, furniture and appliances contributes a further 29% of our greenhouse emissions. Petrol used in car travel contributes about 9% of household emissions, and home electricity 15%.

Inner-city residents have the most polluting lifestyles, with central Sydney and North Sydney topping the ladder, closely followed by central Brisbane. Next were inner Canberra; Woollahra and Mosman in Sydney; Southbank and Docklands in Melbourne; and Fortitude Valley and Newstead in Brisbane. The areas with the lowest greenhouse impacts are the Derwent Valley, Kentish and Brighton areas of Tasmania. In general, households in the highest-consuming areas create double the amount of greenhouse pollution of those in rural and outer suburban areas.

Although inner-city areas are less car-dependent, higher consumption of goods has led to them having an increased impact. Perhaps surprisingly, a smaller average household size was also a factor — larger households tend to share housing, transport, food and other products.

See the atlas at www.acfonline.org.au/consumptionatlas. ■

DO YOU REALLY NEED IT?

- Resist impulse buying — take a shopping list and make a commitment to stick to it.
- Spend your income on services rather than physical products — so, for a treat, get a massage rather than buying a new item of clothing.
- Buy products made from recycled materials and/or ones that can be repaired.
- Share goods and services wherever possible.

+ FAST FOOD

Reducing trans fat in fast food

By now we probably all know trans fats are bad news for our heart. Weight for weight, they're in the same league as artery-hardening saturated fats.

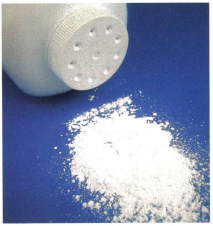
One of the main sources of trans fats is fried food, which means fast-food outlets are major offenders. In March the Federal Government called a roundtable of quick-serve restaurants, including McDonald's, Hungry Jack's, various pizza chains and Krispy Kreme. All the attendees agreed to a timeframe to draft plans to remove artificial trans fats from their food, as well as reducing levels of saturated fats.

Just six months on, a survey of participants has found that most have active plans and strategies in place to reduce trans fats in their products. There's a risk that restaurants may switch to an oil that's lower in trans fats but higher in saturated, so the National Heart Foundation has published a three-step guide for the food service industry on how to reduce trans and saturated fats, and to educate participants on the best oils to use.

While this is positive, CHOICE thinks the government's reluctance to label trans fat content on packaged food products is shortsighted and does nothing to help consumers choose a healthy diet. Surely if it acknowledges the importance of reducing trans fat in fast food, the obvious next step is to inform consumers how much trans fat is in the processed food we buy. We've been pushing for trans fat to be labelled for years now, and we'll continue to argue that consumers have a right to know how much trans fat is in their food. ■

Why is the government reluctant to label trans fat content on packaged food, despite admitting that it's important?

+ HEALTH RISK



Talcum powder — a cancer risk?

Women, take note — if you're in the habit of dusting yourself with talcum powder after a shower or discreetly puffing your underwear with a dab of talc, you might want to think twice. In a study published in the *International Journal of Cancer*, Australian researchers found that women who use talc in the pelvic region have a 17% increased risk of getting ovarian cancer.

This isn't the first study to say there's a link between use of talc and ovarian cancer. Prior to 1976, when voluntary guidelines were introduced, talcum powder was often contaminated with asbestos (a known carcinogen). This means older women in particular are more likely to have been exposed to asbestos-contaminated talc. This Australian research, however, found that an associated risk of ovarian cancer wasn't restricted to older age groups — it was also observed in younger women.

In the last 10 years, other studies have rejected a link between talc use and ovarian cancer. But the design and large scale of this new study means its results can't be ignored.

However, it's important to put the figures into perspective and not let the statistics overshadow the reality. The 17% increased risk is statistically significant, but it's not a large increase in the odds ratio. Women who live to the age of 75 already have a 1 in 123 risk of getting ovarian cancer. But 17% greater than that (1 in 105) might not be a risk you're willing to take, particularly when there's a non-talc option — pure cornstarch powder — that you can use instead.

According to the most recent data, cancer of the ovary is the eighth most common cancer and the sixth most common cause of death from cancer (4.7% of all deaths from cancer) in Australian women. On average, 1130 women each year are diagnosed with ovarian cancer.

For now, the Cancer Council NSW advises women who use talc to consider avoiding it. ■

PHOTOGRAPHY: STOCKPHOTO

+ CARBON OFFSETS

Qantas launches carbon offset scheme

ILLUSTRATION: CYNTHIA NGE

Qantas now offers passengers a way to offset their flights' carbon emissions. The company's online calculator tells customers their emissions and offset cost. The money is invested in abatement projects, which Qantas says may include energy efficiency measures, renewable energy and tree planting schemes. The offsets are independently verified, and approved by the Australian Greenhouse Office (AGO) Greenhouse Friendly program.

However, we compared the Qantas prices and calculations with other websites, and found wide disparities.

For example, Qantas calculates the emissions for one passenger's Melbourne to London return flight, via Singapore, at 3.7 tonnes. Others calculate the emissions from a Melbourne-London return flight as between 5 and 12 tonnes. Prices vary even more widely; you'd pay Qantas $44 to offset these flights ($12 per tonne); others charge anything from $50 to $250.

Should you pay more or less and is Qantas offering a bargain? Without carbon offset industry regulation, it's hard to know. While higher prices don't necessarily indicate better offsets, a for-profit company, Climate Friendly, argues that its price (around $240, or $24 per tonne) reflects the quality of its offsets (Gold Standard renewable energy and Clean Development Mechanism projects) and more accurate and comprehensive calculations (it estimates these flights' emissions at 10 tonnes). Qantas, on the other hand, says it doesn't profit from offsets and uses fuel-burn information from its aircraft systems, allowing more accurate calculations than other companies.

Around 20 companies offer Greenhouse Friendly accredited offsets (including another airline, Virgin Blue). However, not everyone supports that program's projects or aviation emission calculations. The Total Environment Centre (TEC) says Qantas's carbon neutral claims, for example, are exaggerated.

"In our view, the Qantas offer isn't as carbon neutral as they claim," says the TEC. "They've underestimated the CO_2 emitted and rely almost entirely on tree planting, which is a dubious offset method. Qantas has more work to do to present a convincing program."

Qantas says it doesn't just rely on tree planting (AGO schemes aren't limited to forestry offsets), and that offsets are just one part of its broader climate change strategy. The AGO defends its Greenhouse Friendly approved offsets, saying they're based on international best-practice carbon accounting, are independently verified, permanent, occur in Australia and consumers can be certain they've met strict eligibility criteria.

All this argument just emphasises that, without regulation and with such wide disparities, committing your money to any carbon offset scheme is an uncertain enterprise. ■

+ SAFETY FIRST

Château plastic?

From a taste perspective, only you can judge whether you notice a difference.

If you're a wine buff and you're enjoying a relaxing glass as you read this, you'd better put that good crystal down for a second. In news sure to rival the world's greatest revolutions, winemakers have begun to experiment with packaging wine in … plastic bottles! That's PET plastic, just like the soft-drink packaging. What could possibly be the benefits of such a radical move?

The idea was first considered to get over the problem of glass being banned at sporting venues. Spectators who prefer a drop of fine wine can't indulge due to the ban on glass. Enter the plastic bottle. They'd also be more practical at picnics and the beach, and are much lighter to carry around.

More importantly, from an environmental perspective, PET bottles could be a better option. Sainsbury's, a leading supermarket in the UK, is trialling the packaging of Australian and New Zealand wine in PET bottles. It thinks it'll reduce the company's carbon emissions, because it can transport the wine in bulk by ship, and bottle it in the UK. The reduction in weight of the bottles themselves will also reduce carbon emissions during transportation.

The wine will have a shorter shelf-life than wine in glass bottles (around 10–12 months) because the plastic's more permeable and allows more oxygen to enter the wine than glass does. From a taste perspective, only you can judge whether you notice a difference.

It hasn't taken us long to take to the screw cap for wine, so maybe this could be one more step in the evolution of your favourite tipple. ■

+ RISKY LOANS

Loans for cosmetic surgery

The Australian Society of Plastic Surgeons is critical: "It's a bit like putting the ATM next to the poker machine."

A number of finance companies and brokers are targeting potential cosmetic surgery patients with expensive loan offers marketed on websites:

- "If you've been thinking about any cosmetic procedure, then don't let your finances slow you down."
- "Cosmetic surgery financing makes procedures affordable to those who might otherwise not consider it an option."

Cosmetic surgery is undertaken to improve your appearance, rather than because there's a medical need for it. This means it's not covered by Medicare and many private health insurance policies also exclude it. It's different from plastic surgery, such as post-mastectomy breast reconstruction, which is usually covered by Medicare. Prices are high — a breast enlargement can start at around $4500, a combined facelift and tummy liposuction might cost about $12,000 — with anaesthetist and hospital costs on top of that.

You may even get a recommendation for a specific loan from your doctor. Some loans require no deposit and some are approved within 15 minutes — and the loan amount is sometimes credited straight to the doctor.

However, the loans can be more expensive than a low-rate credit card. For example, MEDIPLAN charges:

- An interest rate of 14.7% for members and 16.7% for non-members.
- A 7% processing fee (up to a maximum of $295). For a loan of $4000, the fee would be $280.
- A $12 monthly fee for members, who get the discounted interest rate and a rewards program. (The MEDIPLAN loan is also available for other procedures such as IVF and dental treatment.)

The Australian Society of Plastic Surgeons is critical of the loans. "It's a little bit like putting the ATM next to the poker machine," it says. "It might encourage you to get yourself into debt, whereas otherwise you might go away and think about it. Cosmetic surgery patients are vulnerable and can be encouraged to have surgery rather more than they should because we all feel a little concerned about our appearance. This vulnerability can be used by a finance company."

And if you've taken out a loan, you're stuck with the financial pressures. "I'd be very cautious," says a spokesperson for the Consumer Action Law Centre. "At least if you buy a car on finance, if you can't afford the repayments you might be able to give it back to help repay your debt. But what do you do with a breast implant?" ■

CORRECTIONS

❶ DUAL-FUEL RANGES, OCTOBER 2007

In the table on page 38, the usable volume for the WHIRLPOOL ACG900IX should have been 76 L. Also, this oven does have stoppers to prevent the shelves being pulled all the way out (except for the grill).

❷ RAINWATER TANK PUMPS, NOVEMBER 2007

The photo of the ONGA Dominator 4" 75/35 P3200100 submersible pump on page 61 showed the wrong pump. The correct photo is shown on the right.

PHOTOGRAPHY GERI ROSS

In brief...

Debt repayment fears

Ever more Australians worry about keeping up with debt repayments, says a study by Veda Advantage. Rising cost of living and higher interest rates are the main reasons, with four-fifths saying they'll struggle to meet repayments in the next 12 months.

1.6 million people are in debt stress, but demand for credit cards and other loan facilities is still on the rise, with 13% of borrowers accessing more credit facilities than a year ago.

Broccoli to fight UV?

Scientists have discovered you may not have to eat your greens to benefit from them. Research has found that smearing broccoli extracts on the skin could give UV protection to help avoid skin cancer. They work by stimulating the body's cancer-fighting enzymes, rather than blocking the sun's rays.

PHOTOGRAPHY ISTOCKPHOTO

Organic imports face tougher rules

From 2009, air-freighted food will have to pass Fairtrade and stricter environmental standards to carry an organic label in the UK, due to concerns about CO_2 emissions from the transport of imported organic products.

The Soil Association, a peak organic certification body, will demand that organic food producers in developing countries guarantee minimum wages and good working conditions, while reducing the use of air freight.

+ CHRISTMAS PRESENTS

Geeky gifts

Looking for unusual stocking stuffers this Christmas? Shower your favourite geek with a treasure trove of gadgets that plug into their USB port.

There are dozens of unusual USB-powered devices on offer these days, from desktop decorations to useful utilities. Many are available for under $20. They're all within arm's reach — just fire up your web browser and head to an online gadget store.

Whether you have a desktop or a laptop computer, all you need to get these gadgets ripping is a spare USB port. Here's what you might find:

- **Christmas tree** A leafy desk ornament fitted with pulsating coloured fibre-optic lights. Match it up with a mini plastic snowman that cycles through six colours.
- **Car charger adapter** Plug it into your car's auxiliary socket (aka cigarette lighter) to power and charge phones, handheld computers, PDAs or other devices while on the move.
- **Rechargeable LED torch** Never buy batteries again — just plug this tiny torch into a USB port to recharge.
- **Mini desktop fan** Make work a breeze with this flexi-neck fan featuring soft foam blades (see picture, left).
- **Cup warmers** They won't really heat your coffee, but should give you a little extra sipping time.

Some devices (or similar versions) are stocked by more than one supplier, sometimes under slightly different names, so if you can't find what you want at one outlet, search at another.

To find gadget suppliers online, just search Google's Australian site (www.google.com.au) for 'USB gadgets'. Remember to click the 'pages from Australia' button in the search window for local results only. You'll soon be decking the halls with USB gadgets!

You can see the full report on USB gadgets in the November/December 2007 issue of CHOICE *Computer*. To subscribe, call 1800 069 552 toll-free or go to choice.com.au/magazines. ■

+ FOOD PROCESSOR WITH SCALES

Balancing act

Having kitchen scales integrated into your food processor can make food preparation a breeze. With the KENWOOD Multipro Libra, you can weigh the first ingredient straight into the bowl, zero the scale, weigh the second, and so on. It can also act as a standalone digital-display scale.

The scale weighs in 2 g increments, so we tested it by comparing it to premeasured weights up to 3 kg — its maximum capacity — and found it very accurate. Ideally, a kitchen scale should measure in 1 g increments, but 2 g shouldn't affect the way your recipes turn out.

The Multipro Libra's got a heap of attachments for almost any type of food preparation need you can think of: knife blade, coarse and fine shredding disc, thin slicing/fine shredding disc, chipper disc, rasping disc (for fine grating and snowing ice), dough tool, twin-beater whisk, mill, mini-processor bowl, citrus press, centrifugal juicer, blender — and a carousel for storage.

The hitch with the storage carousel is it's bulky. It fits into the food processor bowl, but it increases the overall height and doesn't store many items for its size. You'll need to find extra space to store the other accessories.

So how does the machine rate as a food processor? Its clearly labelled controls are easy to use. The food processor and blender have clear measurement gradings, are comfortable to grip, and lock into position easily. It's dishwasher-safe and easy to clean.

It chopped carrot and chicken, mixed cake batter, emulsified mayonnaise and milled peanuts to perfection. It sliced carrots and shredded cheese and carrots very well, but did miserably crushing ice in the blender. Only a quarter of the ice was crushed finely and evenly — not great for those strawberry daiquiris. It also became a bit unbalanced when chopping, so you may need to hold it down when using this function.

CHOICE VERDICT

A combination food processor/blender with a lot fewer features will set you back anywhere between $180 and $400. So for $399 and with many more functions, it's well worth considering — provided you can make do with cocktails on the rocks. ■

KENWOOD MULTIPRO LIBRA FP950 FOOD PROCESSOR

Price $399
Distributor
Delonghi Australia
1800 126 659
www.kenwood-australia.com

+ WORKOUT AID

Cool runnings

Motivation waning? Need a bit of help to stay fit? What about a nifty little system incorporating motivational music and encouraging voice feedback, which also tracks your distance, pace, time and calories burned while walking or running?

But wait… there's more. Let it know when you're running out of steam and it'll kick in with your favourite workout tune or some inspiring words. If you want him to, seven-time Tour de France winner Lance Armstrong congratulates you after your workout. And there's an interactive website (www.nikeplus.com), where you can plot and track your results, set goals and challenge yourself and others — even have virtual races with friends on the other side of the globe.

The NIKE+ iPOD Sport Kit is a personal workout coach with a difference. To get going you'll need a pair of running shoes from the Nike+ range, an iPod Nano and the Sport Kit, which comes in two parts: a sensor and a receiver. You place the sensor in the special compartment in your shoe and attach the receiver to your iPod. The sensor monitors your footstrike, working out your pace by figuring how long your foot spends on the ground. You then transfer your workout data from your Nano to iTunes, which automatically sends it on to the Nike+ website.

CHOICE took the kit, shoes and Nano for a 3 km walk and 3 km run in a local park. We tested the system for accuracy using a stopwatch and a road wheel (which measures exact distances) and it passed with flying colours, with less than 1% error for time and less than 3% for distance.

Our tester, who hadn't used an iPod before, found the system a breeze to set up and use, and really liked the voice feedback. Stopping, pausing or requesting a status update were also very easy.

The cost You can get a pair of Nike+ shoes for $150–$240; there's a range of 16 styles to choose from: go to www.nike.com.au. The iPod Nano retails for $199–$279, depending on which version you choose. The Sport Kit itself is $48 (www.apple.com.au).

Good points

- Very easy to navigate and use.
- Male or female voice feedback of distance, time and current pace.
- Music dips in volume during voice feedback rather than cutting out.
- The user guide has clear instructions.
- The receiver can be linked to more than one sensor, so you can share the kit without having to share your shoes.
- Powersong function allows you to jump to a preselected motivational track at the touch of a button.

Bad points

- The rechargeable battery isn't replaceable. However, the manufacturer claims it lasts for 1000 active hours (which should be over three years of running, even for a keen exerciser).
- Works with the iPod Nano only, not with other iPods or digital music players.
- Displays calories but not kilojoules. ■

Coming...

Hair straighteners

You can't change the genes that make your hair straight or curly, but now you can easily change the way it looks if you're unhappy with what nature's dealt you. Investing in a good hair straightener — and learning how to use it — can save you a lot of time and money at the hairdresser's.

Folding bikes

Here's a new commuter scenario: you pedal your bike to the station, fold the bike up, travel comfortably to work without people falling over it, get off the train, unfold the bike and cycle the rest of the way to the office... CHOICE checked out the pros and cons of folding bikes, as well as testing half a dozen models to find out how well they travel — as a bike and when folded.

Cook's knives

On test are 20 cm cook's knives: which cut the best, keep the sharpest, are the easiest to use? Find out what you'd use a cook's knife for, and what other knives are useful for different tasks in your kitchen. If you're putting a knife block together, which knives should you buy? And what makes a good knife — what's worth looking for when you're out to buy one?

PHOTOGRAPHY GENE RIGGS

Write or email — we want to hear from you.

Your experiences help our research and let other readers know about scams and rip-offs. Positive outcomes you've had to a complaint you took to a manufacturer, retailer, importer or service provider interest us too. See opposite for how to contact us.

Frustration at high petrol prices

■ I'm constantly angered by high local petrol prices as it doesn't seem to have anything to do with the price of crude oil. We live in SA and pay 8–15 cents per litre more than towns 30 km away almost all year round. The most I can recall was 19 cents per litre more than Adelaide.

Last week the difference was 13 cents per litre. It was 121.9 cents in Adelaide, and 134.9 cents here on the same day. It doesn't cost 13 cents to cart each litre of petrol the extra 30 km! Once you reach a certain distance from the main population, competition goes out the window.

PHOTOGRAPHY: GENE ROSS

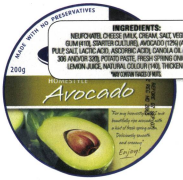
The ACCC talks about price collusion, but it's not collusion here — it doesn't have to be. We have five fuel outlets in the area and they all seem to sit on the same price. We can go for weeks without a single price movement, up or down. In protest, locals won't buy fuel locally, unless there's absolutely no option.

Barry, SA

CHOICE suggests *Thanks for your comments, Barry. If any other readers among you have noticed similar phenomena, or you wish to vent other frustrations involving petrol prices, have your say on our website forum. Go to choice.com.au and type 'frustration at high petrol prices' in the search box.*

When is a preservative not a preservative?

■ The label on this avocado dip claims it's made with no preservatives. However, the list of ingredients on the bottom of the container shows both ascorbic acid


MADE WITH NO PRESERVATIVES
INGREDIENTS:
NEUFCHATEL CHEESE (MILK, CREAM, SALT, VEGETABLE GUM (418), STARTER CULTURE), AVOCADO (12%) (AVOCADO PULP, SALT, LACTIC ACID, ASCORBIC ACID), CANOLA OIL (ANTIOXIDANT 306 AND/OR 320), POTATO PASTE, FRESH SPRING ONION, GARLIC, LEMON JUICE, NATURAL COLOUR (160), THICKENER (1442).
200g
Avocado

and antioxidant 306 and/or 320, which I would consider to be preservatives. Am I wrong, or would the items be added for a preservative other than acting as a preservative?

RG Heinrich, SA

CHOICE explains *Preservatives are added to prevent microbial growth. Ascorbic acid, 306 and 320 are antioxidants, and help stop the product going brown as well as preventing the fat from going rancid. So, while not strictly speaking 'preservatives', these ingredients do help increase the product's shelf life.*

What about phones for grown-ups? (Part 1)

■ Your article on mobile phones (September 2007) was interesting. However, I don't want phones that take photos, record music, etc, etc. I just want one for phone calls and text messages. Phones for 'grown-ups' in other words, especially for older people who can't read the screen without getting their glasses out. Yes, I'm one of the first of the baby-boomer generation, but there are lots and lots coming after me and surely there would be a market for just a plain no-frills mobile phone. Are you aware of any such phones?

Janet, Bargo, NSW

What about phones for grown-ups? (Part 2)

■ I enjoyed your thorough test of mobile phone in the September issue. I note, however, that unlike your tests of some products, you didn't assess phones for use by people with disabilities.

MOTOROLA

You'll be interested to know that the Motorola F3, which was ranked last in your test, is being recommended for people with vision problems. This is because of the large characters on the high-contrast monochrome screen, which can be read in any light. The same goes for the keypad. In addition, it has a hands-free speaker phone and voice-prompt assistance (which explains features as you scroll through the menu). Other benefits are that it's just a phone (which is often all that's required anyway) and it's one of the lightest and cheapest available.

A Jackson, Tasmania

CHOICE replies *The following phones from our September 2007 test could be considered 'no frills' phones: they don't play recorded music or have a camera, and would be suitable for someone who wants a basic phone. They're not good for travelling as they're all dual-band phones, so you can't use them in the US and some other countries. They tended to score towards the bottom of the table, but that's largely because of their lack of features rather than technical performance.*

- *NOKIA 1600 ($89), 1110i ($79) and 1112 ($99) are all pretty similar to each other and received similar scores. The 1110i scored better for SMS, while the 1600 got a better score for its longer-lasting*

battery (two weeks' standby time — one of the best on test).

- *The SAMSUNG SGH-C300 ($99 — exclusive to Telstra) is a slide-top phone, which some may find fiddly. On the other hand, because the screen's protected, it takes a little rough treatment better than a single-piece phone.*
- *Finally, a little frillier and more expensive than the rest, the MOTOROLA W220 ($159) comes with a headset (for hands-free use), FM radio and it can be used as a torch (when fiddling with keys in a lock or coins in a parking meter, for example). It has a clam-shell design, which helps protect the screen, though some may find it fiddly.*

As A Jackson points out, the large, clear screen text and voice prompting of the bottom-ranked MOTOROLA F3 Motofone ($69) makes it particularly useful for elderly people or people with vision problems, and it's recommended by the Independent Living Centre (NSW). It also scored among the best for sound quality.

However, it's not so good for SMS (the main reason it scored lower overall): it only displays two lines of text, only small words fit on the display and it doesn't have predictive texting.

Smart shopper

CHOICE SHOPPER BEST VALUE

■ A quick note to let you know how happy I am with my first experience when using CHOICE Shopper. I saved over $300 on my front-loader washing machine and the service was excellent. Well done!
Michael, by email

CHOICE recommends *For a good price on products, join the ranks of the thousands of CHOICE subscribers who've used this free service — see page 2 for details.* ■

Thumbs up!

■ In times when manufacturers charge a fee simply to look at your gadgets before deciding whether they'll fix them under warranty, Ray of Wagga Wagga was pleasantly surprised when Canon repaired and cleaned his digital camera at no cost — when it was eight months out of warranty. John of Tweed Heads reports a similar experience, giving Canon a Thumbs up for fixing two out-of-warranty cameras at no charge.

■ C Garrard of Pottsville Beach won an iron in a raffle, and when she experienced problems a month later, GAF Control replaced the iron free of charge — no receipt necessary.

Address your letters to ***Thumbs up!*** *at the address below.*

LETTER OF THE MONTH

Happy with laser eye surgery

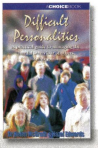
PHOTO COURTESY OF Z PFITZNER

■ I am a subscriber to CHOICE and I wanted to thank you for your article on laser eye surgery (May 2007). I read this article thoroughly as part of my research prior to having PRK in August. I received a referral to my surgeon from my uncle, who is an ophthalmologist, and although my uncle told me LASIK is safer, my surgeon advised that my eyes were more suitable for PRK, so I went with his recommendation.

I wasn't entirely informed that PRK would take a longer recovery time than LASIK, so was a bit shocked when I still wasn't allowed to drive two weeks after surgery. However, at my one-month check-up, I was told that the health of my eyes was excellent, that my vision had exceeded 20/20 and that it would probably continue to improve. I am now extremely happy with the results.

My main forms of research were via my uncle, your article, and by hearing other people's stories/testimonies. Almost everyone I mentioned my impending surgery to said they knew someone who had had laser eye surgery, and was thrilled with the results. This also gave me confidence. I was aware of the potential for things to go wrong, but I couldn't actually find anyone who had experienced any problems.

Thanks again for your report, which was an excellent overall summary of the details of the surgery.
Z Pfitzner, Victoria



To thank you for taking the time to write to us, CHOICE awards a prize of a CHOICE book to the 'Letter of the month'. This month's winner receives *Difficult Personalities*, or any other book of her choice from the list on choice.com.au/books. We're sorry we don't have the resources to answer all your letters personally, and in the magazine we may edit them or print only an extract.

Email ausconsumer@choice.com.au or mail to: Letters, CHOICE, 57 Carrington Road, Marrickville 2204

2007 CHOICE Shonky Awards

Hail to the nine dodgiest products and services we've come across in the past year.

There's no shortage of awards in our daily lives: Employee of the Month, Small Business of the Year, Tidiest Town, the Oscars. What they have in common is their focus on the positive, the good, the best. For most of the year CHOICE is guilty of such bias as well, bringing you *What to buy* lists and Best Buy recommendations. But what about all the efforts of manufacturers to flog duds, of service providers to confuse consumers, of advertising companies to give spin to things that can hardly move? CHOICE finds products that don't do what they're supposed to do, services with unethical fine print and, more and more, advertising claims designed to dupe or mislead.

That's why it's time to put them in the frame again. Here we present the most established (now in its second year) and prestigious (according to the publishers) Award for Excellence in Shonkyness (awarded by a consumers' organisation) — the fabulous CHOICE SHONKYS for 2007.

The CHOICE Shonky for Teleconfusion
Goes to the...

Mobile phone industry

If you're in the market for a new digital camera, you'll study a CHOICE test table. If you need a home loan, a broker can find the best one for you. If you want to compare phone and internet service bundles, it's as easy as placing an ad in CHOICE.

The main reason: the mobile phone plans. You can take your pick from almost 900 different ones, with or without caps and flagfalls, billed by the second or in 30-second blocks, based on dollars or minutes of calls, with free calls to your mum or cheap SMS, with off-peak rates or happy hours, locked in for a month or two years ... And once you think you've got the hang of things, they all change again.

Add to that different deals and bundling bonuses for landline, internet and pay TV, and even industry experts say that bundles are practically impossible to compare.

CHOICE wouldn't mind if we thought it was genuine competition. But as the ex-head of NZ Telecom recently admitted, "Think about pricing. What has every telco in the world done in the past? It's used confusion as its chief marketing tool."

CHOICE agrees there's method behind the madness: shonky method.

(Published in CHOICE, August 2007.)

The CHOICE Shonky for Spoiling the Fun
Goes to the...

PLAY FOR FUN Flying Ring

Where would we be without disclaimers and warning labels on products? Warning: CHOICE might, at times and on occasion, have possibly considered lobbying for some of them (if we thought they were worthwhile).

However, sometimes things go a bit too far — you may have come across the "Don't expose to direct sunlight" disclaimer on a swimsuit label, or the "May cause scalding" warning on the plastic cup of a takeaway hot drink.

The shonkiest example we saw in the past year was "WARNING: Do not launch or throw in the direction of other people" on this flying ring — it makes for a rather frustrating game of frisbee (disclaimer: since the ring does actually fly).

(Published in CHOICE, June 2007.)

"Think about pricing. What has every telco in the world done in the past? Used confusion as its chief marketing tool."

The CHOICE Shonky for Warm Wine & High Energy
Goes to the...

DOME 900192 and RANK ARENA RAWC28 wine fridges

If you don't drink your wine as soon as you buy it, finding a spot at home for good cellaring can be difficult — and a wine fridge may seem a vintage idea.

The DOME 900192 and RANK ARENA RAWC28 hold up to 28 bottles each. That's the wine part. The fridge part is less convincing: both models can't always keep those bottles at an ideal cellaring temperature (around 12–16°C).

In our tests (see page 44), they managed to lower the inside temperature by a maximum of 13°C or so below the external temperature. While this is fine if you live in a relatively mild climate, or can keep the wine fridge in a spot that's not too exposed to heat, it's not nearly enough to guarantee the well-being of your wine collection if your home gets really hot.

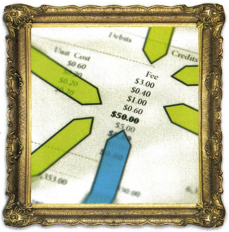
What's more, when pushed to their operating limits, their electricity consumption skyrockets to about 600 kWh/year. To give you a comparison, that's more than a typical new 520 L family fridge/freezer uses (around 520 kWh/year).

CHOICE thinks that's a shonky blend — more like vinegar than Grange.

(Published in Dec 2007/Jan 2008.)

The CHOICE Shonky for Unfair Fees

Goes to...



WESTPAC

In the last Shonky awards we said that aspects of the banking industry are so obviously shonky they're not subtle enough for an award. However, our analysis of the Big Five banks' penalty fees showed that some of them are so excessive (a lot higher than the underlying cost to the bank) as to be unfair — something even the former ANZ boss, John McFarlane, acknowledged — and possibly legally unenforceable.

Fees of up to $50 for a periodic payment or direct debit dishonour, overdrawn account or bounced cheque? Each of the Big Five deserves a Shonky, but it goes to WESTPAC for having the highest or equal-highest fees in six of the eight categories we looked at.

CHOICE also asks how this fits in with WESTPAC's active promotion of its corporate responsibility standards, and its commitment to "promote fairness" as one of its corporate responsibility principles.

Following our article and campaign, most of the big banks (including WESTPAC) reduced penalty fees at least for concession accounts — except the COMMONWEALTH BANK, the largest provider of such accounts, which continues to charge a range of $35 penalty fees on them.

Our penalty for such behaviour: a Dishonourable Mention Shonky.

(Published in CHOICE, July 2007.)

The CHOICE Shonky for Low General Integrity

Goes to...

FERRERO NUTELLA Hazelnut Spread

Child obesity is a serious problem in Australia, so marketing a high-fat, high-sugar food as a healthy choice is just shonky.

Less fat than most peanut butters, less sugar than most jams, said one NUTELLA ad. This may be the case, but out of all these spreads it has the highest combination of both: it's almost 85% fat and sugar, packing a whopping 2175 kJ of energy into every 100 g.

But it contains nutritious hazelnuts and has a low GI, claims another ad. Does that make it OK? No. Hazelnuts are well down the ingredient list (13%) and a low GI doesn't necessarily mean a food is healthy. Chocolate cake with chocolate frosting has much the same GI as NUTELLA, and you wouldn't feed that to your kids for their breakfast every day, would you?

(Published in CHOICE, Jan/Feb 2007.)

If you had to drag your young kids past aisles of Shrekmania, you'll agree the ASB's finding is worthy of a Shonky.

The CHOICE Shonky for 'Ain't Shrek Beautiful?'

Goes to the...

Advertising Standards Bureau (ASB)

This advertising industry self-regulation body administers the various advertising codes, and proudly claims that it's "working to keep Australian advertising standards as high as possible".

When McDonald's, Arnotts, Kellogg's, Masterfoods, Ferrero and others jumped aboard the Shreks-appeal marketing train and changed their production lines to flood supermarkets with green fruit loops, Shrek choc bites, ogre bits, Shrek-shaped pasta meals and a range of other junk food items for kids, the Parents Jury (a network of parents trying to improve the food and physical activity environments for children) at the time called it the "worst example of junk food marketing aimed at children".

With the full support of the ASB, no doubt? Well, not quite. In the past year, every complaint brought to the ASB about Shrek-related food marketing was dismissed, clearing the campaigns of promoting pester-power in children. If you had to drag your young kids past aisles of Shrekmania, you'll agree this finding is worthy of a Shonky. And let's all rejoice: the next animated blockbuster movie is just around the corner...

The CHOICE Shonky for Greenwash *Goes to the...*

LG Combined Steam Washer and Dryer WD-1248RD

Life's good when you have $2900 to spend on a washer/dryer, especially one that promises water savings in full-page glossy magazine ads. Or is it?

Our test showed the claims are true for the washer part of the machine: it uses only 107 L of water for a 9 kg load, which compares well with other machines.

However, what the ads don't mention is that its condenser dryer guzzles down an astounding 74 L of water to dry 5 kg of washing. (The LG can wash 9 kg but only dry 5 kg; you can't dry a full load in one hit.) Drying clothes produces steam; a condenser dryer uses extra water to condense that steam back to water, which then goes down the drain. So drying a full wash load uses considerably more water than washing it.

While this is true for all washer/dryer combos, we didn't come across other ads that try to greenwash consumers quite so blatantly.

Unfortunately, the current water efficiency labelling system is partly to blame, as it doesn't take into account a condenser dryer's water consumption — CHOICE wants washer/dryer labels to show total water use.

(Published in CHOICE, August 2007.)

The CHOICE Shonky for Nasty Shonkyness *Goes to the...*

WOOFAZ Retractable Dog Leash PA0087B

There's nothing amusing about shonkyness when it comes to product safety. A reader alerted us to this dog lead after its metal clip broke while her daughter was walking the family's dachshund. The lead retracted, and the clip went flying straight into the girl's eye, causing major damage.

We tested a range of leads and found that the WOOFAZ clip repeatedly broke at very low forces. We sent our results to the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission, which banned the product.

If you still have one of these leads at home, cut it up and throw it out. When buying a new lead, don't buy one that's rated below the weight of your dog or that doesn't have a size or weight rating.

(Published in CHOICE, December 2006.)

Our tests showed a serve of the superjuices contains only a fraction of the antioxidants you get from a Red Delicious apple, which costs less than $1.

The CHOICE Shonky for Supershonkyness *Goes to...*

Superjuices

Juices from 'superfruits' such as noni, goji, açai and mangosteen have been promoted in shopping centres, healthfood stores and gyms, and have even found their way into mainstream supermarkets.

At up to $85 a bottle they're super-expensive, but the common claim is they're packed full of antioxidants — chemicals that help protect cells from harmful free radicals. While this is true for the actual fruits, our tests showed that a serve of the juices contains only a fraction of the antioxidants you get from a Red Delicious apple (which costs less than $1).

These results alone cry shonky. But things get seriously bad when it comes to other claims made in general marketing material for some superjuices: "enhance libido", "treat menopausal symptoms", "inhibit tumour growth", "equals or outperforms the following prescription and over the counter drugs" (followed by a list of 46 medicines including Lipitor, Methadone and Valium), "outperform current chemotherapy drugs in killing liver, lung and stomach cancer cells".

These claims exploit desperate and vulnerable people, give false hope and are dangerous if superjuice is substituted for conventional medication.

(Published in CHOICE, September 2007.) ■

2007: Toys' annus horribilis

CHOICE tested 30 toys against relevant sections of the Australian standard and almost half failed tests designed to identify possible choking hazards.

nutshell

- Our toy tests showed many just aren't up to scratch. In a year punctuated with massive worldwide recalls of unsafe toys — when manufacturer and retailer awareness of toy safety should be high — this is of great concern.
- The current piecemeal approach to toy safety regulation leaves consumers — and children — more at risk of dangerous products.

The Year of the Toxic Toy: that's what 2007 has been dubbed, with several major recalls, affecting respected brands like FISHER PRICE, MATTEL and RC2, of toys contaminated with lead paint. Further recalls of toys containing small magnets were announced, involving millions of toys worldwide. Again, it was the big brands that were affected, such as MATTEL's Barbie and Polly Pocket products. Many other toys with less well-known brands were recalled for being a choking hazard.

Do you want regular or unleaded?

In addition to the big, well-known brands, checks of toys sold in showbags at this year's Perth Royal Show found many toys contaminated with lead and other heavy metals (cadmium and barium). Many of the toys were also in showbags sold earlier at Brisbane's Ekka show, and parents were warned to take them away from their kids. Such toys included jewellery, masks, wooden blocks from the popular Play School bag and even fake teeth — which would certainly go in the mouth. When you consider eating a chip of lead paint the size of a fingernail would make a child's lead level dangerously high, this is a serious issue.

Excessive exposure to lead can cause learning difficulties, brain damage, attention disorders, hearing loss, slowed growth and behavioural problems. It can be inhaled, absorbed through the skin or swallowed, and children are more susceptible to it as they can absorb up to 50% of the lead they're exposed to (compared to 10% for adults).

In September, the Federal Government banned toys containing more than a certain level of lead, which means if someone's caught supplying such toys, they face large fines as well as a costly product recall. The states have since mirrored this legislation to close a loophole that would otherwise have excluded small unincorporated retailers, such as markets, garage sales and discount stores from this legislation (these dealers fall under the jurisdiction of the states).

Toys on test

In the wake of this year's toy fiasco, CHOICE ran our own toy test. Our toy testing expert, who has a keen eye for potential problems, went toy shopping and chose 30 toys from various outlets: larger retailers, markets and discount stores ('two dollar' shops).

We targeted toys that would appeal to under-threes, even if the labelling said they weren't suitable for this age group. We've often found baby rattles and other obviously infant toys bearing this warning, in effect making it nothing more than a 'get out of jail free' card for the manufacturer. As the ACCC points out, any toy that could be reasonably regarded as suitable for a child aged three years and under must comply with the mandatory toy standard.

While none of the painted toys we tested exceeded the maximum permitted lead levels, 14 toys — almost half — didn't pass one or more other safety tests from the toy standard and could become a choking hazard. >

We've often seen baby rattles and infants' toys labelled as 'not suitable for children under three'. It's just a 'get out of jail free' card for the makers.

Examples of unsafe toys

FAILED

FARM PUZZLE

The smallest cloud in this farm puzzle failed the 'small parts' test. After being informed of our findings, the distributor, Kool Fun Toys, immediately moved to ensure that the cloud can't be removed in further production runs of the puzzle.

SNAIL DRUM

This unbranded 'Snail Drum', bought from Sydney's Paddy's Market, failed the 'drop' and 'tension' tests, with several pieces breaking off and the plastic body shattering. Also, the battery compartment could easily be opened by a child, giving access to the batteries.

BATH TOYS

These squeezy, squeaky bath toys failed the 'shape and size' test: they had sections that were small enough to be partially ingested and become a choking hazard. Except for the ducks, the squeakers could be easily removed too, failing the small parts test.

NINJASENTAI

This 'Ninjasentai' action figure had several loose small parts as well as small parts that were removed by pulling. The packaging carried no age-related warnings.

DID WE BUY A RECALLED PRODUCT?

When looking through the Federal Government's recall notices, we came across one for INTELLIGENCE FUNNY TOYS. That's funny, we thought — we tested a toy from that brand (see right), and it failed the tension test. So we wondered if it was the same toy.

Because there was so little information provided in the notice — like what the toy was, and a phone number for consumer information — we looked it up on the web. We came across other recalls of this company's toys from all over the world, including Ukraine, Dubai, the EU and Canada, though not for this particular toy.

While we're none the wiser as to whether we somehow managed to buy a product that should have been off the shelves earlier this year, the exercise was useful in that it demonstrates how difficult it can be for consumers to identify problem products from recall notices — especially for unfamiliar brands, and even more so having discarded the packaging.

As we were going to press, the ACCC announced it had improved the product recalls website to include pictures of recalled items. Providing greater detail in recall notices will certainly go some way toward clearing up some of the confusion.

▲ The elastic in this rattle broke in the tension test, releasing several beads. It's labelled as suitable for babies 3+ months.

Big-name brands have a lot to lose if there's a safety problem, and may be more likely to 'fess up rather than be found out.

FINDING A SAFE TOY

Our sample was small, covering only 30 of the thousands of toys out there. No doubt government consumer protection agencies will conduct their own tests in the lead-up to Christmas, but in the meantime here are some tips for choosing safe toys.

All toys suitable for children up to 36 months — including toys not marked as such — must meet the mandatory standard AS/NZS ISO 8124.1:2002. They mustn't contain any small parts that are a choking hazard, or produce any when subjected to various tests designed to simulate normal use and abuse (such as dropping, pressing or pulling).

- As a general size guide, if a toy or its parts when detached can fit wholly into a 35 mm camera film canister, it could choke, be swallowed by or inhaled by a child under three.
- Rattles, squeeze toys and teethers should have no small extensions that could fit into the baby's mouth (accidents occur when babies partially swallow the rattle while sucking on it or if they fall with the rattle in their mouth).
- There should be no small parts that could be chewed or pulled off (such as eyes, buttons or wheels), no sharp edges, sharp points, rough surfaces or pinching hazards.
- Think how the toy could be abused, and whether it could become dangerous if used in a way not intended. Children may stick their heads, arms or fingers into apparently unlikely gaps, or poke small items into their noses, ears or mouths.
- Toys that make loud noises — particularly if held against the ear, such as walkie-talkies and toy mobile phones — could be harmful to hearing.
- Check for ventilation on tents, masks or helmets.
- Ride-on toys should be stable and match the age of the child; toy bikes should have effective brakes.
- A toy that shoots projectiles should have a soft, one-piece dart or non-removable suction caps, and the firing mechanism shouldn't discharge any other objects, such as stones or nails.
- Swimming aids or flotation toys should be marked as complying with AS1900.
- Buying reputable brands may not protect you from problem products, but at least the media uproar surrounding any recalls will alert you quickly to the problem!

The ACCC has a comprehensive guide to buying safe toys: go to www.accc.gov.au and type 'safe toys for kids' in the search box.

- Eleven had small parts break off after our tester dropped them or applied pressure or tension.
- One wooden puzzle had a piece that was small enough to present a choking hazard.
- Two sets of squeezy toys each contained toys with sections small enough to become a choking hazard.
- Four had easily accessible battery compartments.

Three of the 14 carried no age suitability information or warnings; two were labelled as suitable for kids under three (from three months and 18 months, respectively).

None of the toys bought from larger retailers failed the testing. This may be because they put the toys through safety checking procedures. For example, the Coles group (including Target and Kmart) requires suppliers to provide assurances that products meet required safety standards, and may commission further tests if it has other safety concerns. Big W has an in-house test lab, though it may accept test results from other accredited laboratories, and inspects every toy it sells. However, these procedures aren't failproof — these stores were affected by this year's recalls of MATTEL, RC2 and FISHER PRICE toys.

By the same token, big-name manufacturers have a lot to lose in terms of their brand's reputation, and may be more likely to come clean if there's a problem, thereby providing some reassurance for consumers.

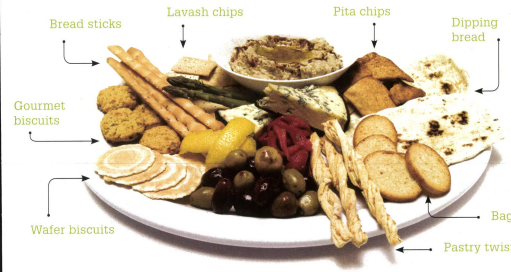
Conversely, discount suppliers and unincorporated retailers lack the accountability of the bigger retailers: often the toys sold have brands that aren't well known — or even have no obvious brand information on them at all — making it more difficult for regulators to keep track of suppliers. In the event of a recall, it's also not immediately obvious to consumers if, say, an unbranded doll they've bought is the same as the one being recalled.

The blame game

The big question is who's responsible? The ACCC puts the onus on manufacturers and distributors of products to ensure they comply with Australian standards. It and state-based consumer protection bodies play a role in regulation, compliance and testing, but don't have the resources to test every single product that's made or imported for the Australian market — after all, there are over 32,000 different toy products on shelves.

CHOICE would like a national product safety system, involving improved collection of information about product-related injuries; mandatory recalls of unsafe products (at present they're voluntary) and detailed recall notices (see page 17 for more); and identical laws and consistent enforcement throughout the country, with a single main agency replacing the current mix of national, state, territory and local regulations. ■

When it comes to the crunch...



Looking for a festive snack that makes you look good? CHOICE presents a selection of sophisticated finger foods.

nutshell

▶ New, interesting party nibbles in profile: which will impress your friends without ruining their good intentions?
▶ It's not that hard to bake tasty snacks yourself — see *Make your own*, page 21.

Whole supermarket aisles are devoted to savoury snacks, crackers and chips. But the party food market has spruced itself up in recent years and these days there's far more on offer than Jatz and crisps — so how do upmarket snacks stack up against the standbys?

Maybe you're looking for a mouthwatering snack to serve with your Christmas drinks and impress your foodie pals, but are concerned your health-conscious friends will think your nibbles are laden with fat. You'll find the answer here. We've looked at snacks from three angles: what flavours they come in, whether you'll need anything to dip them in or top them with, and how healthy they are.

CHOICE carried out a taste test on some popular options, too, to find out what the average palate made of some newer nibbles.

Pastry twists

Flavours? Often in cheesy varieties, these puff-pastry snacks also come in more exotic flavours such as olive and fetta, as well as plainer salt and pepper.

Dip, top or just snack? Serve them on their own — you don't need a topping.

Healthy or heart-stopping? Puff pastry and cheese are bound to contain fat — anywhere from around 15% to around 30%. And most of it's saturated. Plus these are one of the higher-sodium snacks we looked at. Of course, one twist weighs only around 8 g, so if you can stop at one or two...

The skinny on pastry twists

- $2–$4 per 100 g.
- 1600–2300 kJ per 100 g.
- 15–30% fat.
- 700–1600 mg sodium per 100 g.

TASTE TEST

	Price ($ per 100 g)	Rating
HELGA'S Twists Chive & Onion	3.98	Liked more
ALDI Specially Selected Gruyere Cheese Twists	1.99	Average
SOUTH CAPE Cheese Twists Classic Cheddar	3.99	Average
TWISTINI Emmental & Cheddar	3.49	Average
WATERTHINS Cheese Twists Classic Cheddar	3.62	Average
WATTLE VALLEY Deli Bites Cheese Sticks	3.97	Liked less

For the pastry twist, our 40+ panellists tasted a cheese flavour when there was one in a brand. HELGA'S were liked best, but ALDI Twists are the standout for good value.

PHOTOGRAPHY: GENE ROSS

How do the new upmarket snacks stack up against the old standbys of chips and crackers?

Bagel and baguette chips

Flavours? Plain, sesame and garlic are typical.

Dip, top or just snack? Plain varieties team well with a topping, while stronger flavours can be eaten alone.

Healthy or heart-stopping? As they're 14–18% fat (not much of it saturated, thankfully), grabbing too many out of the bowl is likely to blow your diet. The sodium can also be high, approaching 1000 mg per 100 g.

The skinny on bagel and baguette chips

- $2–$3 per 100 g.
- 1800–2000 kJ per 100 g.
- 14–18% fat.
- 200–900 mg sodium per 100 g.

TASTE TEST	Price ($ per 100 g)	Rating
WATERTHINS Bagelettes Original	2.79	Liked more
ALWAYS FRESH Crustini Olive Oil & Sea Salt	2.49	Average
BURNS & RICKER Bagel Crisps Plain	2.00	Average
ROCCAS Baker Chips Sesame	2.35	Liked least

Our panel of over 40 people rated how much they liked a range of bagel and baguette chips (we chose a plain flavour, or sesame where there was no plain).

Pita chips

Flavours? Some brands are plain, while others come in flavours such as tzatziki or barbecue.

Dip, top or just snack? The plain chips can be dipped, while the flavoured ones can be served as a healthier alternative to potato crisps.

Healthy or heart-stopping? Until the recent entry into the supermarket of HELGA'S Pita Crisps, we would have said pita chips have around only 5% fat overall, with very little saturated fat. However, HELGA'S has three times that much, so check the labels if fat (and kilojoules) are on your agenda.

You can save money and control the salt and fat by making your own — cut pita bread into pieces, spread in an even layer on a baking tray and bake at 180°C (with the fan on if you have one) for 15–20 minutes until crisp (you may want to turn them over halfway through).

The skinny on pita chips

- $2–$3.50 per 100 g.
- 1500–1800 kJ per 100 g.
- 5–15% fat.
- 250–1000 mg sodium per 100 g.

Lavash chips

Flavours? We only found one brand in supermarkets — KURRAJONG KITCHENS — but there are others in delis. The KK ones come in two sizes: smaller bite size and a larger snack size; and one flavour: original/plain.

Dip, top or just snack? Lavash chips work with dips, cheeses, or other toppings.

Healthy or heart-stopping? With 8–12% fat, about half of it saturated, lavash chips are a reasonably healthy choice. They're also not too over-the-top for salt — around 700 mg per 100 g. Like pita chips, you can make your own — cut lavash bread to size and bake in your oven at 180°C until crisp.

The skinny on lavash chips

- $2–$3.50 per 100 g.
- 1800 kJ per 100 g.
- 8–12% fat.
- 700 mg sodium per 100 g.

Dipping bread

Flavours? Pita and Lebanese bread have been a dippable option for years, but dipping breads are a smaller size (you rip them up as you go) and come in different flavours — from plain to parsley and thyme or garlic parmesan, for example.

Dip, top or just snack? As the name suggests, these are designed for dipping.

Healthy or heart-stopping? The available brands vary in fat content from about 5–10%, so it's worth checking the labels. The sodium content also varies from around the same as other flat breads (600 mg per 100 g) to somewhat higher (750 mg per 100 g).

The skinny on dipping bread

- $1.50 per 100 g.
- 1200–1300 kJ per 100 g.
- 5–10% fat.
- 600–750 mg sodium per 100 g.

Gourmet biscuits

Flavours? You won't find these in most supermarkets, but delis and specialty stores have numerous brands in any number of gourmet flavours, such as blue cheese or rosemary.

Dip, top or snack? They tend to be eaten on their own.

Healthy or heart-stopping? The fat content varies, typically from a hefty 20% to a whopping 50% fat — and in most cases, two-thirds of that is saturated fat. The sodium content also varies from 400 mg per 100 g to up around 700 mg. Fortunately, they're usually so expensive (we paid as much as $100 per kilo; $5 for a tiny 50 g bag), you most likely won't get the chance to blow your fat budget often.

The skinny on gourmet biscuits

- $5–$10 per 100 g.
- 2000–3000 kJ per 100 g.
- 20–50% fat.
- 400–750 mg sodium per 100 g.

Wafer biscuits

Flavours? These elegant-looking wafers come in everything from plain to exotic Australian bush flavours.

Dip, top or snack? Most suited to topping or dipping, these work well as a fancier substitute for water crackers — they go well with a plate of cheeses.

Healthy or heart-stopping? Wafer biscuits have 4–5% fat, and while the sodium can be quite high per 100 g (1200–1500 mg), a wafer weighs next to nothing, so you have to eat a lot for it to become an issue — the cheese or dips are likely to contribute more than the wafer.

The skinny on wafer biscuits

- $2–$3 per 100 g.
- 1600 kJ per 100 g.
- 4–5% fat.
- 1200–1500 mg sodium per 100 g.

Bread sticks

Flavours? Once only plain — or perhaps with sesame seeds — now these can be found in more exotic rosemary or roasted onion varieties.

Dip, top or just snack? Usually served by themselves, but they can be used with dips.

Healthy or heart-stopping? You might think breadsticks (or grissini, as the Italians have it) would be a good option — and some are, with around 5% fat, but newer versions can have more than 15%. The sodium can also be 1000 mg per 100 g or more. So compare labels before you assume a handful of breadsticks is an innocent option.

The skinny on breadsticks

- $1.50–$3 per 100 g.
- 1700–1900 kJ per 100 g.
- 5–17% fat.
- 800–1200 mg sodium per 100 g.

Prices are what we paid in Sydney supermarkets in September 2007. The nutrition information is typical, and figures are rounded.

350 million That's how many dollars' worth of potato crisps and snacks we fill up our supermarket trolleys with each year. No wonder we're becoming an obese nation.

OTHER SNACKS (IN ORDER OF FAT CONTENT)*

	Fat (%)	Kilojoules per 100 g	Sodium (mg per 100 g)
Pretzels	5	1600	2000
Rice crackers	10	1850	550
Water crackers	10	1750	600
Jatz-type crackers	25	2050	650
Corn chips	30	2150	500
Potato chips	30	2200	650

USING THE TABLE

Several of the newer snacks compare well to old favourites, but some are higher in fat and salt than others, so choose carefully if you're watching what you eat.

TABLE NOTES

** Typical figures, rounded to the nearest 5 g fat, 50 kJ and 50 mg sodium. From food composition table data.*

Make your own

What you'll need

- 1 packet puff pastry sheets (thawed, if using frozen).
- Your choice of filling: pâté; olive tapenade; capsicum tapenade; grated parmesan cheese and chopped parsley.
- Egg wash (1 egg beaten with 2 tablespoons of water).

Preheat the oven to moderately hot (200°C), fan on. Following the instructions below, prepare the nibbles with your choice of filling. Bake in the oven for 12–15 minutes or until crisp. Cool before serving.

Palmiers

Spread a pastry sheet with your choice of filling. Fold in the edges of the pastry to meet in the centre. Spread with more filling, then fold in half lengthways. Press lightly to form a roll. Cover and refrigerate for 30 minutes. Cut the pastry roll widthways into 12 mm slices. Place them well apart on a baking tray lined with baking paper. Follow cooking instructions, above.

Parmesan and parsley twists

Brush a pastry sheet with egg wash. Sprinkle parmesan and parsley over the pastry. Place another sheet of pastry on top; press firmly. Cut the pastry into 2 cm strips. Press together the top end of the pastry strip and then gently twist from the bottom end.

Place the twists well apart on a baking tray lined with baking paper. Brush with egg wash and sprinkle with extra parmesan. Season with salt and pepper. Follow cooking instructions, above.

PHOTOGRAPHY: GENE RUSS

Eat, drink and be very happy?

Don't panic if you haven't decided on the bubbly for Christmas lunch or New Year's Eve — CHOICE's expert tasters uncork the top drops.

nutshell

- On test: 67 sparkling whites, reds, pinks and champagnes — an appropriate drop for every occasion.
- Some of the top-scoring wines in the test come from Tasmania, not just from France.

There's a good sparkling wine out there for every taste, budget and occasion. As you're probably guided by price when choosing a wine, for the taste test we split the whites into four price brackets; there's another bracket each for sparkling reds and rosés.

When judging a wine, expert tasters try and ignore personal preference, looking simply for attributes that indicate it's well made and has no particular faults. The score they award reflects this. For example, a score of 14–15 points (out of 20) indicates the wine's OK but nothing special. A wine that scores 15.5–16.9 points is awarded a bronze medal at wine shows, 17–18.4 points earns a silver and 18.5 points or more a gold medal.

We've printed the experts' scores, but to see whether ordinary people share their views, we also held a lay panel tasting with some of the wines the experts rated well. For many of the wines, the two groups' judgment was consistent. Both the experts and the lay panel tasted the wines blind: they didn't know what they were tasting.

While the experts didn't award any of the wines the equivalent of a gold medal, quite a few bottles in all price brackets would have qualified for a bronze at a wine show, and most of the premium wines for a silver.

Cheap and cheerful

Five wines top-scored with 16 points in the lowest price bracket (up to $12), two of them costing just $6. In the $12–$20 bracket, the top sparkling wine managed a score of 16.5 points. The two $6 QUEEN ADELAIDE and MATTHEW LANG wines both hit a note with our lay panel too, who scored them higher than the experts' top-rating $18 BROWN BROTHERS. They also liked the YELLOWGLEN Yellow, which some of the experts found a bit sweet. But if you like your bubbly sweet, you can't go past OMNI Blue, which impressed our judges with freshness and balance.

Viva Tasmania!

Three Tasmanian sparklings stood out among the higher-priced wines. In the $20–$40 group, the BAY OF FIRES Tigress and NINTH ISLAND (both from Tassie) shared line honours with YELLOWGLEN Perle 2003. The lay panel awarded its highest average score in the tasting to the BAY OF FIRES Tigress.

In the 'more than $40' premium price bracket, which featured predominantly French champagnes, the Tasmanian ARRAS 2001 impressed judges with its

Did you know ?

The Australian wine industry, which already operates in warmer conditions than most, is particularly vulnerable to global warming. In a modelling study undertaken jointly by the CSIRO and University of Melbourne, researcher Dr Leanne Webb recently predicted that by 2030:

- Grape quality could decline: in a weak warming scenario (numbers in brackets are for a high-impact scenario) by 16% (52%) in the Riverina, 5% (17%) in the Hunter Valley, 4% (10%) in the Yarra Valley, 3% (7%) in the Margaret River region and 1.2% (4%) in the Coonawarra.
- Land suitable for grapes might be cut by 10%.
- The temperature zones best for pinot noir, chardonnay and sauvignon blanc would be reduced by more than 20%.

A modelling study by the Wine Industry Drought Taskforce, the Winemakers' Federation of Australia and Wine Grape Growers' Australia revealed that next year's harvest could be down by more than 50%, if current drought conditions continue.

CHOICE Selection $

Below is our selection of the 14 top-scoring wines from the four price brackets in the sparkling white range, plus the best sparkling rosés and reds — something for every taste and occasion.

LESS THAN $12

MATTHEW LANG Brut Cuvée	$6.00
OMNI Blue	$9.00
QUEEN ADELAIDE Brut	$6.00
SEPPELT Fleur de Lys PNC	$12.00
YELLOWGLEN Yellow	$11.00

$12 TO $20

BROWN BROTHERS Brut PNC and Pinot Meunier	$18.00
BAY OF FIRES Tigress PNC	$23.00
NINTH ISLAND Chardonnay Pinot Noir Pinot Meunier	$24.00
YELLOWGLEN Perle 2003	$24.00

MORE THAN $40

ARRAS Chardonnay Pinot Noir 2001	$47.00
LOUIS ROEDERER Brut Premier NV	$72.00

SPARKLING ROSÉ

OMNI Pink	$10.00
YELLOWGLEN Pink	$11.50

SPARKLING RED

OMNI Red	$9.00*

PNC Pinot Noir Chardonnay.
NV Non-vintage.
** Price for 1 L; the rest are for a standard 750 mL bottle.*

youthfulness combined with palate weight and length. They rated it and the French LOUIS ROEDERER as the best wines in the test. When we revealed its identity after the scoring, they were genuinely surprised — all had thought it was French. That it sells for less than $50 is an added bonus, considering that most of the other bottles in this bracket cost at least $20 more.

Taste over prestige

Interestingly, the two highest-priced champagnes in the test ended up as 'mixed emotions', the category reserved for wines the experts couldn't agree upon. The $260 MOËT & CHANDON Dom Pérignon 1999 and the $180 BOLLINGER La Grande Année 1997 failed to convince all our tasters. While some thought the Dom was "the ultimate elegance", one referred to the Bolli as "love-it-or-hate-it style", and another commented on the Dom's "slightly bitter finish".

This shows tastes are a personal thing. The tasting notes in the table should help you find wines you like and avoid ones that don't match your taste.

Coloured bubbles

Pink and red sparkling wines aren't everyone's cup of tea (so to speak) — they display very different characteristics from traditional sparkling wine. The rosés tend to be light and fruity, on the sweeter, strawberry-flavoured side. Red sparklings, on the other hand, are generally more full-bodied, with ripe berry, plum and spice flavours that make them suitable with food or drunk on their own. Two rosés and one red made it into our CHOICE selection.

Is there a good 'diet' bubbly?

White sparkling wine generally contains 11–13% alcohol by volume; the sparkling reds in the test contain slightly more: up to 14%. This year we tested a few bubblies with lower than typical alcohol levels, and fewer kilojoules to boot.

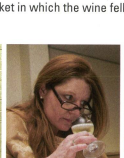
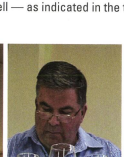
The sweeter-style YELLOWGLEN Vintage Bella 2007 and BROWN BROTHERS Zibibbo have 7.5% and 6% alcohol respectively. Also with just 6% alcohol, the YELLOWGLEN JEWEL range (Yellow and Pink sparkling) is particularly marketed at the more health-conscious drinker. It has 40% less alcohol and 30% fewer kilojoules than YELLOWGLEN's standard Yellow and Pink varieties, and even has a nutrition panel on the bottle.

Some of our lay panel liked the JEWEL Pink; however, the experts singled out both JEWEL low-alcohol varieties as tasting "different", "dull" and "watery". But if you're less of a wine connoisseur and more concerned with your weight, health and alcohol consumption, you might find them tempting to get you through the party season. >

Next year's wine grape harvest could be down by more than 50% if current drought conditions continue.

Meet the experts

Our thanks go to the six expert tasters who gave up their precious time making wine or teaching about it, to sniff, slurp and spit their way through the 67 bottles in our test. They knew the price and style bracket in which the wine fell — as indicated in the table — but not which wine they were tasting.

Peter Aldred

Peter Aldred is in the School of Science and Engineering at the University of Ballarat, where he lectures in food science, including sensory evaluation. He grows grapes and produces his own wine and is a regular participant in wine tastings.

Liz Augustyn

Liz Augustyn studied oenology at Elsenburg Agricultural College in South Africa and worked as a winemaker for two wineries in the Stellenbosch region before coming to Australia. She's currently assistant winemaker at Margan Family Winegrowers in the Hunter Valley.

Garry Ford

Garry Ford is a maker of sparkling wine with the Hardy Wine Company in South Australia. He's a specialist with 25 years' experience in sparkling wines, including vintages in France, South Africa and Germany.

Kirsten Potowski

Kirsten Potowski has a passion for riesling, pinot noir and travel. She's worked in vineyards in the Rheingau region of Germany, in Denmark and in Lucca, Tuscany. She's had wide experience in sparkling winemaking and is now winemaker for Josef Chromy Wines in Tasmania.

Paul Rogers

Paul Rogers is a wine lawyer and consultant to the Australian wine industry. He lectures on wine law at the University of Western Sydney and holds the prestigious Australasian Wine Masters award from the International Wine Academy (San Francisco).

Geoff Skurray

Professor Geoff Skurray from the University of Western Sydney is a winemaker, wine judge, industry consultant and educator. He's a leading authority on the science behind food manufacture, nutrition and winemaking; his current research is on the health benefits of wine.

Reading a wine list

A good wine list should match the restaurant's food, style and price level. There should be a good balance between white and red wines, wines from different regions (unless it's in a wine-growing region, where local wines tend to dominate), and it should have a number of wines available by the glass. If you don't want to mention a price range aloud, wine expert Joseph Nase suggests you point discreetly to a price on the list and tell the wine waiter, "I'd like to be in this region" — leaving your guests thinking you're talking wine regions.

A quality restaurant is likely to have a good house wine, so don't just dismiss it. However, many restaurants tend to offer more wines by the glass rather than a house wine.

To choose from the bottled wines on offer, it helps to know the basics. Typical characteristics of some popular grape varieties are:

Whites

Chardonnay Full-bodied, dry, often with an oaky character, but light and fruity unwooded varieties are available too.
Riesling Crisp and tangy, dry or semi-dry.
Semillon Soft and dry, and tends to age well.
Sauvignon blanc Fresh, herbaceous style, works well blended with semillon.
Traminer Spicy, aromatic, floral.
Verdelho Full-bodied and tangy, fruity.

Reds

Shiraz Spicy and peppery or earthy and bold.
Cabernet sauvignon Big and soft, especially when aged.
Pinot noir Very different lighter style, fragrant and fruity.

Matching food and wine There's heaps of advice on websites such as www.rosemountestate.com.au or www.fosters.com.au. In general, try to match lighter fare with a delicate wine and rich food with a more powerful one.
Vintages Most of the bottled wines sold in restaurants are vintage wines. In general, age usually improves red wines; whites and rosés tend to be better drunk young, but some whites (for example, Hunter Valley semillons, German rieslings) also age well.
Region This can give you a good indication of the wine's style. Warm-climate regions tend to produce full-bodied wines — for example, earthy Mudgee reds, powerful McLaren Vale shiraz or complex Coonawarra cabernet sauvignon. The grapes for lighter styles are often grown in cool-climate regions, such the Yarra Valley for creamy chardonnay or Tasmania for sparkling wines.
Price The mark-up for wine depends pretty much on the restaurant's overheads and location. So, just as you'd expect to pay more for the food served in an upmarket eatery on the waterfront than in your local neighbourhood, expect the same for the wine.

BRAND (IN RANK ORDER WITHIN PRICE BRACKETS)	SCORE OUT OF 20	PRICE ($)	TM / BF	ORIGIN	TASTING NOTES
UP TO $12					
Matthew Lang Brut Cuvée	16	6..00		Australia	Pale yellow; citrus and apple aromas; crisp palate with a touch of sweetness at the back — nice lemon and lime aromas
Omni Blue	16	9.00		Australia	Light green; sweet violets and muscat aromas; fresh and well balanced, crisp, sweet palate — for those who like something sweet, this is it
Queen Adelaide Brut	16	6.00		Australia	Very pale with a green tinge; light citrus and floral nose; lemon and lime with residual sweetness on the palate — well balanced food wine
Seppelt Fleur de Lys Pinot Noir Chardonnay	16	12.00	BF	Australia	Pale straw with small beads; rich honey nougat aromas; strawberries and cream — may appeal for its soft roundness
Yellowglen Yellow	16	11.00		Australia	Pale yellow, fine bead; delicate floral and fresh lime aromas with hints of dough; well rounded palate, a bit 'sweet and sour' — lighter, sweeter style
Carrington Vintage Brut 2006	15.5	7.50		Australia	Green tinge with fine beads; light citrus nose; lean, slightly sweet palate — crisp, refreshing
Seaview Brut	15.5	8.00		Australia	Bright yellow; light citrus nose with bruised apple aromas; marmalade and cumquat fruit flavours — fresh and sound, good food wine
Seaview Grande Cuvée	15.5	8.00		Australia	Straw-coloured with fine beads; buttery nose with hints of citrus and some honey flavours — a good wine to start the day with
Wolf Blass Red Label Chardonnay Pinot Noir	15.5	9.50		Australia	Good beads and colour; some lemon and general citrus aromas; honeysuckle finish, a bit flat — well balanced with a lingering mouthfeel
Carrington Brut Reserve	15	7.50		Australia	Pale green, fine bead; simple, fresh aromas; sweet, lemon sorbet, musk on the palate — lacks length
Great Western Imperial Reserve	15	7.00		Australia	Pale golden straw-coloured; delicate floral and citrus aromas, savoury notes; residual sweetness overwhelms the palate — simple, lightweight
Hardys Regional Reserve Classic Cuvée	15	6.00		Australia	Pale green; floral, confectionery aromas and flavours on a simple, sweet palate — simple moscato (Asti) style
Killawarra Klassic Brut	15	10.00		Australia	Golden yellow; not very much fruit aroma; rich nougat flavours and a refreshing citrus lift, a bit light in palate weight — a good consumer wine
Wolf Blass Eaglehawk Cuvée Brut	15	10.50		Australia	Bright golden; nutty aromas with mature, developed fruit notes; yeast dominates on a fresh, slightly sweet palate — lacks depth and intensity
Lindauer Brut	14.5	11.50		NZ	Golden yellow; slightly oxidised, toasty, yeasty aromas; developed, full-bodied palate — simple but sound, and attractive if you like mature wines
Omni NV	14.5	10.00		Australia	Hint of green with medium beads; slight apple and citrus aromas; low in fruit character — lacks fruit intensity
Seaview Brut de Brut	14.5	8.00		Australia	Light yellow with a hint of green; fresh citrus and burnt rubber on the nose; lively palate that lacks a bit in length — fresh and crisp
Sir James Cuvée Brut Pinot Noir Chardonnay	14.5	12.00		Australia	Pale green; lemon, lime and dusty aromas; creamy mouthfeel, harsh finish — fresh but lacks depth and intensity

Table continued overleaf ▶

USING THE TABLE

Score Each expert gave the wines a score out of 20, according to the international show-scoring system for wines: 3 for appearance, 7 for nose (aroma) and 10 for palate. The score printed in the table is a consensus score they reached when discussing the wines after the tasting, still without knowing what the wines were.

When a wine received too wide a range of scores and no consensus could be reached, we called it a *Mixed emotion*, listed the range of scores and included two overall comments to reflect the tasters' different views. If it sounds like something you might like, give it a try.

While the experts used the same benchmarks for judging all the wines, they were slightly harsher in their judgment of the more expensive wines. So the scores are only comparable within, not between, the brackets.

Price This is based on prices we paid in bottle shops in Sydney in August 2007. We found great price variations from one shop to another, especially among the higher-priced wines, so shop around and watch out for specials.

TM/BF This information is taken from the bottle label, which usually indicates if a sparkling wine is made according to the **traditional method** (TM, otherwise known as 'méthode champenoise') or **bottle-fermented** (BF, where the wine is transferred into a tank for clarification in bulk after the second fermentation in the bottle). A blank means it's bulk-fermented in a tank, or the winemaker hasn't indicated that it's bottle-fermented.

Tasting notes These are compiled from the experts' tasting notes on the wine's colour and appearance, nose, palate and overall impression. Combined with the scores they should give you a good indication of the wine's style, aroma and flavour.

For help deciphering the wine-tasting jargon, go to choiceextra.com.au and click on any of the articles under 'sparkling wine' in the index, where you can also find information on the various methods used to make sparkling wine and champagne.

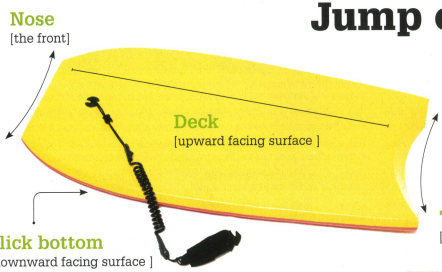
Age usually improves red wines; whites and rosés are generally drunk fairly young.

BRAND (IN RANK ORDER WITHIN PRICE BRACKETS)	SCORE OUT OF 20	PRICE ($)	TM / BF	ORIGIN	TASTING NOTES
Renmano River Breeze Sparkling Cuvée	14	4.00		Australia	Pale green straw-coloured; light citrus nose, a bit dirty; no sweetness upfront on the palate, sharp — watery fruit weight, one-dimensional
Yellowglen Jewel Yellow	14	12.00		Australia	Pale yellow; light citrus and wet dog aromas; too acidic/sour on the palate, lacks flavour depth — clean but no complexity and balance
Mixed emotions					
Cockatoo Ridge NV Brut	11.5–16	8.00		Australia	Rose colour, brassy hues; musky, strawberry aromas; berry flavours on a long, balanced palate — very pleasant food wine; simple wine, falling over
Jacobs Creek Chardonnay Pinot Noir	13–17	11.50	BF	Australia	Pale green straw-coloured; savoury, rich aromas with nutty, spicy notes; short, fresh, crisp palate — good, well balanced; like carbonated lemon juice
Minchinbury White Seal	13–17	7.00		Australia	Pale golden with green hues; limey-lemony and stinky socks aromas; savoury palate with zesty acidity — good flavour depth and structure; slight off flavour
BETWEEN $12 AND $20					
Brown Brothers Pinot Noir Chardonnay and Pinot Meunier	16.5	18.00		Australia	Golden straw yellow; lemon and biscuity aromas, savoury notes; rich, full-flavoured palate, citrus and apple flavours, good acidity — toasty complexity
Brown Brothers Zibibbo	16	15.00		Australia	Pale yellow; sweet and aromatic, perfumed, muscat nose; tropical fruit and lolly flavours — attractive, spumante-style
Deutz Marlborough Cuvée Brut	16	20.00	TM	NZ	Pale golden straw-coloured; dulled floral, bruised apple aromas, sulphide characters (farmyard); nutty, complex palate, good acid spine — solid weight, sound
Yellowglen Vintage Bella 2007	16	16.00		Australia	Salmon pink; sweet fruit and muscat-style aromas; floral and fresh palate with concentrated raisin flavours — sweet, moscato style
Yellowglen Vintage Crémant 2005	15.5	14.00		Australia	Golden straw-coloured; hints of tropical fruit and biscuits on the nose; slightly sweet and spicy palate — good fruit and a little toasty complexity
Yellowglen Vintage Pinot Noir Chardonnay 2005	15.5	14.00		Australia	Pale yellow; fresh fruit aromas, nutty notes; citrus-driven palate with zesty acidity but bitter finish — sound, some complexity
Grandin Brut	15	13.00	TM	France	Golden yellow straw-coloured; light citrus nose, dirty socks; pink grapefruit flavours, lacks middle and length — reasonable weight but sulphide detracts
Orlando Trilogy Pinot Noir Chardonnay Pinot Meunier	15	14.00		Australia	Green hues; slightly burnt, limey-lemony aromas; citrus flavours, but lacks fruit weight, moderate length — lacks freshness
Yarra Burn Pinot Noir Chardonnay Pinot Meunier 2005	15	18.00		Australia	Pale yellow; slight citrus aromas; palate lacks fruit weight, yet elegant acidity — sound but not overly satisfying
BETWEEN $20 AND $40					
Bay of Fires Tigress Pinot Noir Chardonnay	16.5	23.00		Australia	Pale green; citrus fruit on the nose, slightly farmyard; rich lemon juice and creamy dough flavours, sound structure, well balanced — clean and refreshing
Ninth Island Chardonnay Pinot Noir Pinot Meunier	16.5	24.00		Australia	Pale yellow; yeasty, nutty aromas with peaches and cream; lemon and lime flavours on a complex, savoury palate with fresh acid — vibrant, rich and well balanced
Yellowglen Perle 2003	16.5	24.00		Australia	Pale yellow; mushrooms, biscuity/toasty aromas; green fruit flavours, zesty acid, some complexity, clean and dry — easy drink, sound quality
Chandon Non-Vintage Brut	16	23.00	TM	Australia	Pale yellow; cashew nuts, yeasty aromas, slightly sulphuric; lemon juice flavours, good palate weight — rich and flavoursome but lacks some tannin/structure
Chandon Vintage Brut 2003	16	33.00	TM	Australia	Bright yellow straw-coloured; burnt match and sour milk aromas; rich, ripe fruit acidity, flavoursome long palate — pity about the sulphide!
Jantz Premium Non Vintage Cuvée	16	24.50		Australia	Pale golden straw-coloured; delicate citrus and floral aromas, hint of toast; fruit and nutty flavours, good balance, but lacks mid palate — interesting
Mixed emotions					
Croser Pinot Noir Chardonnay Piccadilly Valley 2004	10–17	34.50		Australia	Pale yellow; slightly volatile (vinegary) nose; lean and mean palate with zesty acidity — well made if slightly faulty; secondary characters (gluey oak, volatility) detract
Grant Burge Pinot Noir Chardonnay	14.5–17.5	21.00	TM	Australia	Pale straw-coloured; nutty, cheesy aromas with peaches and cream; slightly sweeter, toasty palate, good length — rich, complex, creamy; flat and flabby
MORE THAN $40					
Arras Chardonnay Pinot Noir 2001	18	47.00	TM	Australia	Pale yellow; lime and grapefruit, salty oyster and pizza dough aromas; zesty acid on a rich, fruit and savoury palate — everything in balance and fresh and lively
Louis Roederer Brut Premier NV	18	72.00	TM	France	Pale yellow; oysters, toasted sourdough and floral aromas; complex savoury secondary fruit palate, great length and balance — lovely and fresh, great aging potential

BRAND (IN RANK ORDER WITHIN PRICE BRACKETS)	SCORE OUT OF 20	PRICE ($)	TM / BF	ORIGIN	TASTING NOTES
Piper Heidsieck Brut	17.5	60.00	TM	France	Golden straw-coloured; soft fruit and rich bready aromas; mushrooms and earthy flavours — good depth and flavour, but lacks the finesse and length of the best
Veuve Clicquot Ponsardin Brut	17.5	72.00	TM	France	Pale straw yellow; layered, rich nose with sweet and sweaty aromas; good fruit and bread flavours, dusty minerality — will benefit from aging, good food wine with oysters
Billecart Salmon Brut Reserve	17	78.00	TM	France	Pale straw green; hints of honey with some lemon/lime and yeast aromas; bready/buttery flavours, good fruit weight on the palate — very well balanced, good food wine
Bollinger Special Cuvée Brut	17	91.00	TM	France	Golden straw yellow; sweaty and dirty aromas; savoury flavours with secondary rich fruit, clean acid, complex mouthfeel, good structure — very flavoured, good food wine
Moët & Chandon Brut Imperial	17	65.00	TM	France	Pale yellow; good fruit aromas, yeasty, savoury; musk, chalk, minerals on a creamy, well structured palate — complex, with character
Pol Roger Reserve Brut	17	70.00	TM	France	Bright straw yellow; citrus fruit aromas, some slight sulphite; attractive limey, oyster flavours, good mouthfeel and length — lingering finish, well balanced
Mixed emotions					
Bollinger Brut La Grande Année 1997	14–18	180.00	TM	France	Pale yellow, very fine bead; oyster, iodine, yeasty, bruised apple aromas; creamy palate, aged, lemon/lime finish — big, rich, love-it-or-hate-it style; unpleasant
Moët & Chandon Dom Pérignon 1999	14.5–18.5	260.00	TM	France	Pale yellow, fine bead; slight tropical fruit, slight sulphides on the nose; rich, smooth mouthfeel, lovely balance — ultimate elegance, French-style; slightly bitter finish
Moët & Chandon Grand Vintage 2000	15–18	91.00	TM	France	Yellow straw-coloured; lemonade and sweaty onions, burnt toast aromas; bruised citrus and toast flavours, mouthfilling — nice, richer, Aussie style; flat and sharp aftertaste
SPARKLING ROSÉ					
Omni Pink	16.5	10.00		Australia	Pink, very fine bead; tropical fruit, honey and peaches on the nose with a touch of muscat; complex toast, berry and cherry flavours — good strength and fruit character
Yellowglen Pink	16.5	11.50		Australia	Pale pink; sweet raspberry, floral aromas; sweet notes of strawberry, cherry and lychee, good, zesty acid balance — good fruit, perfume characters, slightly sweet
Carrington Blush	16	7.50		Australia	Pink rose colour; nutty, floral, slight confectionery nose; rose petal, blackcurrant and mulberry flavours, residual sweetness — a simple, easy drink, slightly flabby
Veuve Clicquot Ponsardin Rosé (with pink 'ice' jacket)	16	85.00	TM	France	Salmon, onion-skin-coloured; farmyard, strawberry and stewed fruit aromas; nutty, dry, austere style — has some flavour depth but pretty simple, short and unsatisfying
Yellowglen Jewel Pink	16	12.00		Australia	Pale pink; tropical fruit aromas, chalky, herbaceous, slightly dirty; residual sweetness, strawberry and honey flavours, a little short — one-dimensional, quite watery
Jacobs Creek Sparkling Rosé	15.5	12.00	BF	Australia	Light pink; sweet floral notes, dirty, yeasty complexity; breadfruit sweet on the palate, good acid complexity, phenolic finish — slightly sulphuric, otherwise well balanced
SPARKLING RED					
Omni Red	16.5	9.00		Australia	Crimson colour; dusty pencil shavings, old oak, savoury and spicy aromas; rich chocolate and fruit flavours, fruitcake complexity — firm, lively, reasonably balanced
Andrew Garrett Sparkling Burgundy	16	15.00		Australia	Garnet colour; oak and berry aromas with herbaceous, savoury notes; full fruit flavours on a soft, well integrated palate, drying tannins — good food wine
Banrock Station The Reserve Sparkling Shiraz	16	8.50		Australia	Deep crimson colour; complex cheesy, mushroom, earthy aromas; leather and spice, sweet fruitcake flavours, vintage port-like, hot finish — lacking in fruit flavours
Rumball Sparkling Shiraz Coonawarra Cuvée	15.5	20.00	TM	Australia	Brick red, browny colour; complex, aging nose with prune aromas and hints of leather; flavours of ripe ruby fruits, cedar box and spice, firm tannins — bottle-age heavy
Seaview Sparkling Shiraz	15.5	8.50		Australia	Bright black/red; good fruit and floral aromas; smoky and perfumed fruit and vegetable flavours on a bitter, lean palate, short finish — well balanced food wine
Morris Sparkling Shiraz Durif	15	17.00		Australia	Ruby brick-red; cherry, oak, caramel, spice aromas; ripe blackberry and jammy flavours, overpowering tannins, short finish — full-bodied food wine, a bit bitter and empty
McGuigan Black Label Sparkling Shiraz	14.5	10.00		Australia	Bronze-tinged colour; lifted floral/fruit aromas, a touch dusty; fruit and earthy, smoky and savoury flavours on a soft palate, lacks freshness — lots of simple age
D'Arenberg The Peppermint Paddock Sparkling Chambourcin	14	25.00		Australia	Deep red with purple edges; blackberry, spicy nose with hints of volatile acidity; loads of blackcurrant on the palate, slight harshness to the finish — simple, sulphide detracts
Mixed emotions					
Seppelt Original Sparkling Shiraz 2005	14–17	19.00	BF	Australia	Ruby red; perfumed spice aromas with hints of Bandaid and cough syrup; raspberry, cassis and leather flavours, good length — well balanced; just sweet, lacks depth
Yellowglen Red	14.5–18.5	12.00		Australia	Crimson/garnet colour; barnyard, spicy, meaty, menthol aromas; savoury/sweet palate, lovely finish, soft tannins — the best in the group; mixed emotion, good food wine

Jump on board

Your kid's desperate for a bodyboard but you don't know the deck from the nose. Here's how to choose one.



nutshell

- You can get a reasonable starter board for a child for well under $100 — find out here what you'll need and what you won't.
- More of a surfer? See our article on surfboards on choice.com.au.

Is your child nagging you to buy them a bodyboard for Christmas? Or do you want to head into the waves yourself — without going through the hard yards of learning to surf? The beauty of bodyboards is that they're quick and easy to get started on — although they can take years to master, so you won't be doing complex aerial manoeuvres from the word go.

They're extremely popular at Australia's beaches, outnumbering surfboards in a ratio of about four to one. Shorter, wider and lighter than their stand-up cousins and with a squared-off nose, their core's made from a softer foam rather than hard fibreglass. More affordable, less tiring, safer and much easier to transport, bodyboards are great exercise and loads of fun for kids and adults of all ages.

You can ride them 'prone' — face down — which is most common, or 'dropknee' (half-standing with one knee on the board), or even standing up.

Board history

Generally thought to be based on ancient Hawaiian Paipo boards, modern bodyboards were invented in Hawaii by musician, engineer and surfboard designer Tom Morey in 1971. When Morey's surfboard broke, he coated a piece of foam in newspaper and shellac, used a household iron to shape it and took it into the surf — or so the story goes. Music-lover Morey called his creation the 'boogie board'.

What it'll cost you

The price of a board depends on the materials, as well as size, any channels or special contours, graphics such as a signature from a professional rider, and surface design.

Entry-level boards for children retail from $15 to $50 in budget department stores. In sports retailers and specialist shops, boards can sell for over $400 — with every price point in between.

Jargonbuster @*!?

Deck The surface you lie on.
Nose The front, where you hold on.
Tail The other end. The shape of the tail determines how the board moves in the waves. Types include the original crescent tail, shaped like a new moon. It provides maximum hold on the wave and is good for dropknee riding. The more recently designed bat tail (which roughly resembles a bat's wings) gives more speed and manoeuvrability and is often preferred by prone riders.
Core The core of most boards is either polyethylene (also called dow or PE), or polypropylene (polypro or PP). Dow is heavier and more flexible than polypro and performs well in cold water and big waves. However, it can absorb water over time or if damaged. It also generally needs to be strengthened with at least one **stringer** (see below), otherwise it can fold under the rider. The more expensive polypro, on the other hand, is 100% waterproof and is lighter, stiffer, more durable and better in warm water and smaller, choppy waves. Both dow and polypro come in different grades of strength and consistency and this affects the price. A core can also be a combination of various types of plastic or foam, such as EVA (ethylene vinyl acetate) and EPS (expanded polystyrene) — mainly used for cheaper children's boards.
Slick bottom The downward-facing surface is covered by a slippery covering called the slick, which gives the board strength and speed. The two most common types of slick are Surlyn, a softer plastic hybrid, which is very flexible and responsive, and HDPP (high-density polypropylene), which is harder, thicker and stiffer, but with little or no flex. HDPP is usually found on beginner boards and is good for casual riders as it's very durable and hardy, but serious riders who want to progress will prefer the higher-performance Surlyn.
Rails The sides of the board. Straight rails are faster. A rounder outline (with a central widepoint) gives better manoeuvrability.
Channels Grooves cut into the slick bottom that channel the water for better performance and control.
Stringer A straight rod inserted into the board's core to maintain stiffness and increase the lifespan of the board.

For between $150 and $200 you should get a dow or polypro core (or a combination), an HDPP slick, possibly one stringer and a reasonably durable quality of foam.

Splash out $250–$400 and you'll get a board made for more proficient riding. Often endorsed (and signed) by a pro rider, it'll typically incorporate single or double carbon-fibre stringers, deck contours, elbow grooves, nose bulbs (lumps in the nose area that help you grip), a Surlyn slick, a stronger, denser and more durable grade of foam and cool graphics.

If you want to choose your own shape, materials and features, you can order custom-made boards over the internet.

When you're buying

To get a feel for what suits you, try out a few friends' boards, if you can. Once in the shop, ask for a salesperson who bodyboards. They can run you through the shop's range and help you choose the right board for your level of proficiency, budget and expectations. Here are a few tips to help you find the right board for you:

Size is important The board should reach your navel when stood on its end, give or take a few centimetres. Too small and it'll sink; too big and you'll struggle to control and manoeuvre it. It should also feel comfortable to carry under your arm. If the rider is a child and still growing rapidly, buy a board a few centimetres longer, so there's some room to grow.

Rock it Lie the board flat on the floor. Although the nose will be slightly curved, the board should be reasonably flat at the tail end and should only rock a little. Excessive rocking may indicate warp from being stored in hot conditions.

Check the flex Stand the board up, with the tail on the floor. Flex the board very gently — you want it to spring back easily.

Look at the bottom surface It should be slick and smooth. Don't buy it if it has any creases or cracks.

Children or young teens who are learning don't need an expensive board, and a cheaper board without a slick bottom and with minimal features is adequate. Buy them a hard-bottom board once they're adept at catching waves and are ready to progress and refine their skills.

For older teens and adults, features such as stringers and channels might seem a bit much while they're still learning, but they'll appreciate them as their ability increases.

Don't buy with your eyes You're much better off spending money on good construction and features, rather than fancy artwork or a pro signature.

Factor swim fins into your budget. They're invaluable for paddling out long distances to waves. Open-heeled fins are better for bodyboarding. Swim-fin tethers will keep your fins from floating away.

STAYING SAFE

- You should be a reasonably strong swimmer and your level of fitness needs to be appropriate to the surf conditions. If you're a beginner, only surf on beaches where lifeguards are on duty.
- Before going into the water, check the surf patterns and look for rips for a good 10 minutes while doing a few recommended warm-up stretches to limber you up. Don't go in the water if you're not sure whether you can handle the conditions.
- Parents need to watch small children very carefully. Getting in the water with them is the only really safe option. Lifeguards have the whole beach to watch and conditions can change in the blink of an eye.
- If your board doesn't come with one (and most medium to high-end boards don't), buy a leash with a strong wrist, ankle or bicep attachment, so you don't lose your board. If you get into trouble, the board will also provide some flotation. Always check the leash is secure before entering the water.
- Be aware of others and give other surfers and swimmers a wide berth. Dive if you see a surfboard coming towards you.
- Stay calm and wave an arm overhead if you get into trouble. Thrashing around just means you'll use up valuable energy.
- Always use a good waterproof sunblock; put plenty on and renew it often. It's easy to wipe it off with the towel when drying yourself.

Bodyboards are more affordable, less tiring, safer and easier to transport than surfboards.

Caring for your board

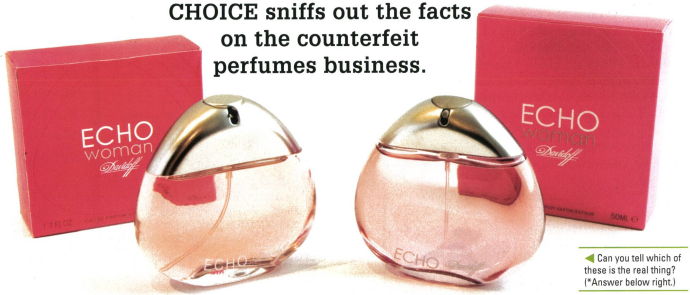
Rinse your board with fresh water after use. Boards shouldn't be left in direct sun for long periods or in hot conditions with no ventilation, as this can cause them to blister, bubble or bend out of shape. Most boards are laminated and heat or sun can damage the laminate.

A bag will protect your board from the elements and any accidental damage. Beware of dark-coloured bags, though, which will absorb more heat.

Waxing the nose area, edges and centre of your board with surf wax will help you grip and stop you sliding off. ■

Are they friend or faux?

It's a multi-million dollar a year industry. CHOICE sniffs out the facts on the counterfeit perfumes business.



◀ Can you tell which of these is the real thing? (*Answer below right.)

nutshell

- To the untrained eye, a sophisticated fake perfume can easily pass for the real thing.
- Parallel importing (where a store buys directly from a wholesaler overseas, rather than from the perfume's authorised distributor) has paved the way for more competitive pricing — but is it also allowing fakes to end up on retail shelves?

To buy cheap perfume or not to buy cheap perfume — that is the question. You may have come across your favourite fragrance for a fraction of the cost, but how can you be sure you're not about to fork out for a fake?

While it's more likely you'll come across a counterfeit while browsing the flea market stalls or buying products online, most consumers are unaware that highly sophisticated knock-offs are also finding their way onto retail shelves. And because from the outside some of these counterfeits are almost indistinguishable from the real thing, they remain undetected until someone buys one.

Counterfeiting of all kinds is estimated to be a $600 billion a year problem worldwide, and according to the International AntiCounterfeiting Coalition in the United States, the profits have been linked to funding organised crime, drug trafficking and even global terrorism.

Research commissioned in 2006 by the cosmetics industry body ACCORD estimated that counterfeits account for around 2–3% of the Australian trade in cosmetics and fragrances, and this figure is increasing. Counterfeiting is depriving the government of taxes and may be damaging the reputation of the trademark owners — not to mention potentially posing health risks to the consumer.

What you're getting when you buy fake

Because counterfeit perfumes haven't been subjected to the same rigorous testing as legitimate products, they can contain a whole host of unknown chemicals, making them unlikely to comply with the regulations set by the Australian cosmetics regulator (NICNAS). This leaves open the potential for all sorts of nasty surprises, such as burning the skin, causing a rash on people with sensitivities and staining clothes; they may even cause respiratory problems.

Tests on some fake fragrances have allegedly found traces of urine, which gives a whole new meaning to 'eau de toilette'! Others have been revealed as a simple combination of fragrance and pond water.

The scent of a counterfeit may have a similar 'top note' (see *Jargon buster*, page 32) to the original, but otherwise won't usually smell anything like it. If you're buying the perfume for the first time, you're unlikely to realise this, of course. A counterfeit may have a sour or bitter smell. Its fragrance will also most likely only last a short period of time on the skin. One expert told CHOICE that a perfume should linger at least six hours, so if it lasts 30 minutes, it's probably a dud.

So your 'bargain buy' could end up not looking like such a find after all. Unfortunately, though, it's likely you won't know it's fake till you get it home. Most perfumes come packaged and wrapped in plastic, and look like the real thing — but don't smell like it (see *Spot the Davidoff difference*, right).

$667.4 million — According to cosmetic industry analysis company bU Australasia, this is how much the Australian retail fragrance market was valued at in 2006.

How's counterfeit perfume getting in?

The Australian Customs Service told CHOICE that since February 2006, over 31,500 counterfeit fragrances have been seized by officials. The fake goods are arriving in Australia as air or sea cargo commercial shipments as well as through the post and in the possession of travellers. The ones that make it through undetected are likely to be sold cheaply at discount stores, markets and online.

According to authorised Australian importers, counterfeit goods are also finding their way in among shipments of 'parallel imports'. Parallel imports are goods that have been legitimately purchased directly from wholesalers overseas, rather than from the official distributor or manufacturer in Australia. This generally allows them to be sold for a lower price.

Parallel importing has been legal since 2000, and has had a significant impact on the perfume market in Australia, accounting for approximately 35% of fragrance sales. It helps explain why you can now readily find discounted perfumes, both online and in some retail outlets. While this is a plus for the consumer, some industry experts say that with it comes a higher risk of picking up a counterfeit.

However, some online retailers CHOICE spoke to that rely on parallel importing assured us they only purchase their perfumes from large, reputable distributors and check their products for signs of counterfeit.

To be sure

The lure of a bargain is hard to resist, but is it worth the risk? The experts we spoke to were all in agreement on one thing: "If the price seems too good to be true, it probably is." Even if it's a genuine product, a lower price may indicate that it's passed its use-by date or has been stored incorrectly or for too long.

The Fragrance Foundation Australia says there's only one way to be 100% sure a perfume is genuine, and that's by buying from outlets that purchase products from the authorised distributors, such as Myer, David Jones, certain pharmacies, speciality stores and websites like www.adorebeauty.com.au.

An example of a major company that's taken steps to protect itself and consumers from counterfeits is Coty Australia, distributor of fragrances such as CALVIN KLEIN, JENNIFER LOPEZ and JOOP!. It's established a network of authorised stockists, including online retailers, which only stock legitimate perfumes purchased directly from the company.

If you do come across a fake, contact the store you purchased it from, or the Australian company that distributes the product. If it's determined to be fake, it's up to the trademark owner to launch civil legal action against the seller of the item. If you've bought a perfume from other than an authorised stockist, you may not get your money back if it turns out to be fake, which is why it's wise to check their return policy (see *What to look* >

'Parallel importing' explains why you can now readily find discounted perfumes, sold legally.

SPOT THE DAVIDOFF DIFFERENCE

One of these bottles of Cool Water is real and the other is fake. Can you tell which is which? CHOICE couldn't. (Answer on page 32.)

The two bottles are nearly identical apart from some subtle differences. It wasn't until both perfumes were sprayed onto cardboard that the big difference became apparent. "The top note is vaguely Cool Water but... it doesn't last, and it's sour..." said Coty's Managing Director about the counterfeit version.

On the right is the packing from both bottles of Echo Woman (pictured opposite). Once the packaging has been opened, you can immediately see the difference between the two. The counterfeit perfume sits inside an empty box, while the legitimate perfume is padded with extra packaging inside the box — though you wouldn't be able to check this if the perfume was sealed in cellophane.

* **ANSWER**: The one on the right in the photo on page 30 is the real Echo Woman.

Even if it's genuine, a low price may indicate a perfume's passed its use-by date or has been stored incorrectly or for too long.

Market buyers beware

Vivien from Sydney got less than she bargained for when she bought a prestige perfume from a market stall.

"It was probably about two years ago that I bought a fragrance from the market. The stallholders said it was original when I asked, and it certainly looked legitimate. It was sealed in cellophane and it even had 'Made in France' on it. It really looked quite authentic. I was suspicious, of course, because of the price — it was $20 at the market and $100 in the shops, but still I thought, 'it's worth a try'.

"But it was really quite obvious when I got home that it wasn't the right perfume. After the first fragrance started to wear off, it had this really bad smell — like cat's wee! I knew what the perfume should have smelt like and it wasn't that. I didn't bother to take it back to the market — I just put it down to experience."

out for, right) before buying. The online perfume store www.perfume.com.au offers a $40 verification service of your perfume if you're unsure whether you've bought the real thing.

Buying online

If you're after a bargain, you're certain to think you've found one online, but according to intellectual property lawyer Stephen Stern, "These days, there's probably more counterfeit on the internet than genuine product."

To minimise the risk of buying a shonky perfume, look for the following when purchasing from an Australian online store (overseas stores will be governed by their country's consumer laws — if they exist — which may not offer the same protection as those in Australia):

- An Australian Business Number (ABN). It's often displayed with the company address.
- Contact details, including a contact phone number for customers, email address, street address (not a post office box) and mailing address.
- A returns policy. If the product's faulty or not genuine, you'll want to know how the store intends to deal with it. Australian-based stores have to comply with the Trade Practices Act, but they may also have provisions for situations the law doesn't cover, or details on how they'd prefer to be contacted to ensure you get the best service. Be aware that you may have to pay postage when returning goods, even within Australia.
- If you're buying a perfume from eBay, investigate the seller's feedback by clicking on the feedback link, and beware of new sellers selling prestige fragrances — look for established retailers with a good reputation. Also check that they're PayPal-verified, as sellers of counterfeit goods may not disclose their contact information to PayPal.

What to look out for

If you're not buying a fragrance from a major retailer, here are some things to look out for:

- What does it cost? If the price seems too low, then chances are it's not the genuine article.
- Where is it being sold? Street corner, flea market, suspect online website? If it looks dodgy, it probably is.
- Look at the packaging. Are there any misspellings? Does the country of origin match the country usually on the product? Is the printing or cardboard of poor quality? If you've got an old box, take it shopping with you, for comparison.
- If you can, look at the contents. Are there differences in colour or consistency from the normal product? It should be clear and not overly oily.
- How does the product smell? It shouldn't be bitter or sour. Spray some on a piece of cardboard, then go away for half an hour. Does the fragrance last?
- Ensure the seller guarantees the perfume is 100% genuine (some offer a certificate of authenticity) and has a return policy if you're not happy with the product. ■

ANSWER
The one on the right is the counterfeit of DAVIDOFF Cool Water.

Jargonbuster @*!?

A fragrance, just like a wine, has different layers: the top, middle and base notes.

Top note The first part of the fragrance to hit your nose — the initial 'impact', which is composed of more volatile materials.

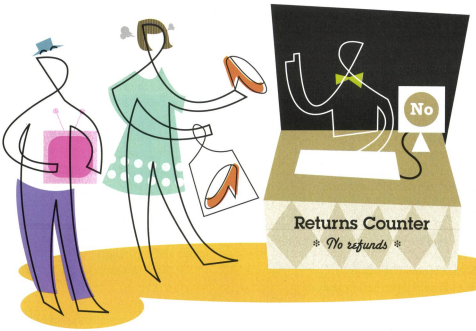
Middle note The second part — the 'heart' of the fragrance that defines its character.

Base notes The last part of the fragrance that lingers on the skin, made from lasting materials.

Eau de Cologne contains 3–6% perfume oils.

Eau de toilette contains 6–15% perfume oils.

Eau de parfum contains 15–25% perfume oils.



Know your rights

It's the silly season for impulse buying — so make sure you understand how to play the shopping game.

ILLUSTRATION: CYNTHIA NGE

nutshell

- If you buy faulty goods you're entitled to a refund, but the retailer isn't obliged to give you one if you just change your mind.
- Make sure you're dealing with a reputable company when buying online.

Can you get a refund for unwanted Christmas gifts? When your brand-new 106 cm plasma TV stops working, should you accept a credit note? What should you know before keying in your credit card details online?

What's more, with the post-Christmas sales next month, it's easy to be led astray and you may end up with goods that aren't all they were cracked up to be. So if things go awry — here's what you'll need to know.

Do your research

We know this takes away the fun — but avoid impulse buys: you could save yourself a lot of hassle later on when you realise it's not really what you were after. Do some research about the item you want to buy and which features you're after, especially for a major appliance.

As a starting point, check out CHOICE's test articles for the most reliable products and top performers, and then shop around and compare the prices offered.

For big buys such as a fridge or dishwasher, computer or car, you could let CHOICE SHOPPER do the bargain-hunting for you. Call 1300 360 655 with the brand and model you're keen on and the best price you've seen, and we'll try to get a better deal for you. You can phone weekdays during working hours, and you'll need to tell us your subscriber number.

Returns policy

When the time's come to buy, examine the item carefully in the shop. Take it out of its packaging if you can, check for flaws or defects, and try it on or test it. If it's all good, ask the shop about its returns policy.

If the product you purchased is faulty or doesn't live up to claims on its label or packaging, you're entitled to a refund, regardless of the store's returns policy. However, retailers aren't obliged to refund your money if you just decide you don't like it once you get it home. They may, but on their own terms.

For example, some give 'no questions asked' cash refunds, while others will only exchange the product within a certain time period or if it's still in its original packaging and has all labels attached. Some may offer you a credit note instead, which may have a certain time limit. Only go ahead with the purchase if you're satisfied with the returns policy.

Your entitlements

It's illegal for a shop to display a 'no refunds' sign; they can't take away your legal right to compensation if what you bought isn't up to scratch. All products sold in Australia must meet basic standards; if they don't, you're entitled to a refund, repair, replacement or compensation. Goods must:

- Be of merchantable quality, meaning they must meet a basic level of quality and continue to work for a reasonable time. For example, if your TV with a 12-month manufacturer's warranty developed a fault you weren't responsible for two months after the end of that warranty period, the manufacturer would probably have to repair it free of charge under your statutory warranty rights, as you could reasonably expect a TV to last more than a year.
- Be fit for the purpose, meaning they must be able to do the job you were led to believe they'd do and meet the purposes for which they're advertised.
- Match the description or sample you based your purchase decision on, including information >

Your warranty rights under the Trade Practices Act might give you more protection than the maker's warranty.

< given in advertising, demonstrations, labelling, promotions and by the salesperson.

- Have no defects that affect their merchantable quality, unless you knew about the defect beforehand.

These statutory, or implied, warranty rights are part of the Trade Practices Act and apply Australia-wide, regardless of the store's return policy. They might give you more protection than a manufacturer's warranty — something worth remembering before making a purchasing decision based on an extended warranty.

Getting a refund

If a product fails to meet any of those four key requirements, you're entitled to compensation, regardless of the store's policy on refunds and whether or not it's still under warranty. A refund should be in cash if you paid in cash, or credited to your account if you paid by credit card.

The retailer may offer you a replacement product, repair or a credit note, but you can insist on a refund if that's what you want and as long as you qualify for one. Whether you can claim a full or partial refund or a repair depends on the circumstances — how much you paid is taken into account, and other factors include the way the product was described in any promotional material, how long you've had it and how much it's been used.

If you can, take the product back to the retailer as soon as possible, along with your receipt. If you can't transport it, call the retailer to arrange for them to collect it — they'll have to pay any freight costs. It's the retailer — not the manufacturer — who owes you compensation, so don't let them convince you otherwise.

However, there may be occasions when you prefer to take a defective product to the manufacturer, such as if it's still under warranty, if you've lost your receipt or if it was a gift and you don't know where it was purchased.

Beware when buying goods through an auction or private sale; refund rights don't apply to these transactions unless goods have been misrepresented. It's simply a case of 'buyer beware'.

Using lay-by

If you're low on funds after the Christmas shopping extravaganza, lay-by lets you pay for a product over a certain time while the retailer holds onto it. It's an alternative to using your credit card or instore credit facilities, which means you save on interest, but you'll most likely find other fees apply. Check the terms and conditions before you commit yourself to buying.

A lay-by is a binding contract, so it should be in writing and clearly explain the details of the goods, deposit and payment amounts, required payment frequency, the length of the lay-by and any charges.

Door-to-door sales

Beware of 'free gift' offers and hard-sell tactics used by well-trained door-to-door salespeople and infomercials — you may end up buying something you don't really need, or want. However, if you do buy at the door, you're still entitled to change your mind.

Door-to-door sales are covered by state laws and have a cooling-off period, during which you can withdraw from the purchase without penalty. Some conditions apply to the cooling-off period. It's usually 10 days — or five clear business days in NSW — and in most states excludes financial products, charitable donations and business transactions. It applies only if the door-to-door seller arrives unannounced and to purchases over a certain amount ($100 in NSW, $75 in Queensland, $50 elsewhere).

Buying online

Although the wonders of the internet may make shopping appear limitless, your consumer rights don't offer you the same protection. While sellers have to abide by the same laws that apply to traditional retail transactions, enforcing your rights may be more difficult if the company isn't Australia-based. Your best bet to avoid being fleeced is probably to make sure you're dealing with a reputable dealer *before* you make your purchase.

Have a good look at the retailer's website. You're looking for full contact details, a privacy policy that says the retailer won't share your details with anyone else, terms and conditions and a secure payment process. The item you're buying should be well described and the price, availability, charges, and payment and refund policies clearly displayed. If you're buying a gift or need the product within a certain timeframe, you might also want to check upfront when you can expect delivery of the goods and what to do if the product is delayed.

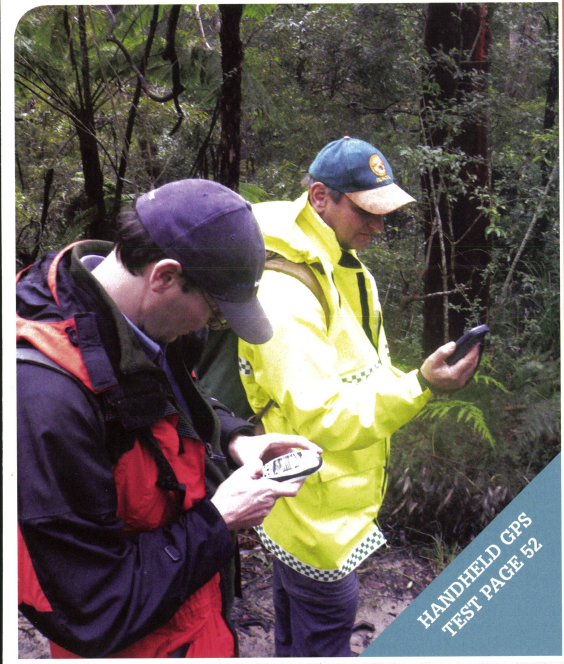
Finding a solution

If a problem arises, try to resolve it with the store first. Talk calmly and assertively (to the manager, if necessary), suggest a resolution and take notes of your conversation, including the name and position of the person you're talking to. Give them a short but specific time to respond if they ask for it, and if you don't hear back by the due date or aren't satisfied with the response, put your complaint in writing to the store's manager.

If it remains unresolved, contact your local consumer affairs or fair trading centre for advice. It may assess the matter and act as an informal negotiator. However, it can't order a party to resolve the complaint — only a local court or consumer tribunal can do that. It can only advise on what's involved in taking the matter further, and that may be to court — if you think it's worth the effort. ■

On test

Home entertainment, whitegoods, household and personal appliances: they're all tested here.



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PHOTOGRAPHY: IRENE ROSSUOTT

CHOICE has its own testing laboratories, where experienced technical staff put products through their paces. We use test methods from Australian standards, as well as developing our own in order to match the way consumers use a product in real life. We buy most of the products we test, to maintain our independence from manufacturers and also to get to know what you're faced with in the shops. Our recommendations are based on a product's quality and performance, with no hidden bias.

For more product tests go to choice.com.au

Summer means sizzling barbecues

Are you cooking more meals outdoors? Then our latest test of barbecues is well worth reading.

nutshell

- Three models stood out for cooking very well — the table, page 38, has details.
- To keep your barbecue in top shape, regularly clean and season the hotplates, and keep the barbecue under a cover when you're not using it.

Now that summer's arrived, covers are coming off barbecues all around the country, often for the first time in months. Unfortunately, if you haven't maintained your barbie properly, this can reveal a rather sorry sight: cobwebs, an empty gas bottle, grease, grime and rusty hotplates. Perhaps it's time for a good overhaul, or even a brand-new barbecue?

CHOICE put seven new four-burner models (costing $399–$999) to the test to find out which cook the best. Our tester cooked steak, sausages and roast chicken, and also assessed whether you'd enjoy using the barbecues — for example, do they blow smoke in your face? Does your hand bump into the food warmer when turning the food? How hot do the hood and controls get?

Plus we have a few tips to help you keep your barbecue in tiptop shape.

Putting it all together

Barbecues can be difficult and time-consuming to assemble — don't buy one on Saturday morning and expect to be using it in the afternoon. The components are heavy and often come in two or more large boxes, so lifting them and getting them home from the shop is hard work before you even start. Make sure all the boxes will fit into your car or borrow a vehicle that can take them.

There are usually lots of parts and they don't fit together easily. To put a barbecue together, you need to be pretty handy, and have a second person to help with the lifting and positioning of parts. If none of the above applies to you, it's worth paying extra (perhaps around $100–$150) to have the barbecue delivered and assembled for you.

The art of barbecue maintenance

This advice will apply to most barbecues, but still read the manufacturer's advice on how to prepare and maintain your particular model.

Wash the hotplates Before you use the barbecue for the first time, remove any protective plastic coating from the hotplates. Give the hotplate and grill a thorough scrub in warm soapy water, to remove any residues from manufacturing.

Season the hotplate and grill Give them a light coating of cooking oil and turn all the burners on low for about 30 minutes; the oil may smoke, but that's normal.

Afterwards, let the hotplates cool and wipe off the excess cooked oil. Add a little fresh oil and you're all set to start cooking.

After cooking, scrape off food residue and excess leftover oil, but leave a light coating of oil to protect the plates from rust. If you decide to give the hotplates a thorough clean with soapy water, make sure you season them again afterwards.

Some hotplates and grills have a non-stick coating and shouldn't need as much oil for cooking. These usually only need a wash before the first use, but between uses it may still be worth protecting them with a light coating of oil.

Non-stick cooking sheets are available for the barbecue hotplate (but not the grill) from Magic Cooking Products and other suppliers. We haven't tested them, but they could be worth a try to keep the hotplate clean while cooking.

Cleaning up To clean grease and dirt from the barbecue's exterior, use any all-purpose cleaner or warm soapy water. For stainless steel, use hot water with vinegar or a commercial stainless steel cleaner. Stainless steel can suffer from 'tea-staining' — brown discolouring on hot surfaces, such as inside the hood — which can be reduced by regular cleaning with soapy water or a commercial cleaner.

Clean out the fat collection tray after each use and line it with fresh foil.

Under cover Keep your barbecue under a cover to protect it from the elements. Some models come with a cover; if not, it's worth buying one. Make sure it can be easily secured to the barbecue with cords or Velcro straps, so it won't blow off on a windy day.

Gas bottle To check your gas bottle for leaks, connect it to the barbecue and turn on the gas at the bottle. Brush soapy water over the bottle's joints and connections; leaking gas will create bubbles.

Make sure your gas bottle is full enough before you start cooking. Fitting a gauge on the tap connection is the surest way to know how much gas you've got left, but you can also weigh the bottle on your bathroom scales. A 9 kg gas bottle typically weighs around 10 kg when empty (the weight when empty — the 'tare' — will be stamped on the bottle), so it weighs about 19 kg when full.

PHOTOGRAPHY: JEFF HERRINGTON

What to look for

USEFUL FEATURES

- **Easy access** to all the cooking areas; the warming racks on some hoods can get in the way.
- **A large cooking area**, preferably half grill and half hotplate. Cast iron hotplates are more susceptible to rust; if you live in a coastal area, enamel or stainless steel hotplates are recommended.
- **Fat tray** This should be easy to remove and replace and be self-centring, to catch all the fat.
- **Ignition** Most of the tested barbecues have piezo ignition; you just press a button or one of the gas knobs and it generates a spark to ignite the gas. Some piezo systems ignite a jet of flame that's directed into the burners to light them more reliably. Other models have electronic ignition, using a battery to create the igniting spark. All the tested models were easy to ignite.
- **Double-skin hood** This will reduce the external temperature of the hood and protect your fingers from getting sizzled.
- **Hood closure resistance** The hood should have good resistance to closing, so it doesn't accidentally bang shut on a windy day.
- **Exterior finish** Exterior finishes include a painted surface, vitreous enamel and stainless steel. Paint is generally the cheapest finish and can scratch or flake off over time. Vitreous enamel is tougher and usually more durable. Stainless steel is also very durable, but can discolour when heated, and can require extra attention to cleaning as it shows smudges and fingerprints more readily than other surfaces. See *Cleaning up*, left.
- **Thermometer** Useful when you're cooking with the hood down, but we've often found they're not accurate. Once you get used to the temperatures it shows, though, you can still use it as a guide.

Hood opening
Make sure it opens up far enough not to direct smoke into your face.

Handles
These should be far enough away from the hot panel behind that you don't burn your hand.

Controls
They should be clearly labelled and have positive stops at both the low and high positions so you don't accidentally flick your burner off when adjusting the heat. They should also be easy to grip and turn.

PHOTOGRAPHY: GENE ROSS

Annual check-up It's worth giving the barbecue an annual maintenance check, and the start of summer is probably a good time for this. Check the hotplates are clean, the trolley and hood are in good condition, the fat tray is lined with fresh foil or sand, volcanic rock (if used) is replaced, and the gas bottle is in good condition. Check the supplied instructions for specific maintenance advice. If all this is too much hassle, there are companies who'll come to you and service, clean and repair your barbecue.

Trolley

Wheels or castors are useful if you want to move your barbecue around. All the tested models have four castors, or two castors and two wheels. Most large barbecues are very heavy and hard to move without them. If you go for a model with only two wheels, check that it's not too heavy to lift at one end, and if it doesn't have handles, make sure there aren't any sharp edges where you grip it.

Material Wooden trolleys need their bolts tightening regularly. Metal trolleys don't seem to have this problem. Stainless steel trolleys might be fashionable and durable but are harder to clean. With some metal trolleys, watch out for rusting, as some metals will rust in certain environments, such as near the beach.

Height Check the height of the trolley to make sure it's comfortable for you.

Large side trays are handy for putting food and cooking utensils on. >

What to buy

BEST BUY

BEEFMASTER BMH4CS

PRICE $599

GOOD POINTS

- Excellent for roasting a chicken and cooking steak.
- Good open access to food: the food warmer swings out of the way.
- Controls are large and clearly labelled.

BAD POINTS

- No side panels to protect food from draughts.
- The stainless steel cupboard door requires extra attention when cleaning.

SUNBEAM Innovo GB5100

PRICE $999

GOOD POINTS

- Best cooking score; it's excellent for roasting a chicken and cooking steak, and very good at cooking sausages.
- Good open access to food: the food warmer swings out of the way.
- Very good warranty — 20 years for the frame and hood, five years for the burners and flame tamers, two years for the hotplates, one year for other parts.
- Electronic ignition lights individual burners separately.

BAD POINTS

- The protective film on stainless steel areas is very difficult to remove.
- The exterior stainless steel surface requires extra attention when cleaning.
- The inside of the stainless steel hood discolours ('tea-staining'), which is difficult to remove.
- The fat tray is awkward to remove (you take it out of the back of the trolley).
- The thermometer isn't accurate. Sunbeam told us its new range has a new thermometer.

Do any of the barbies blow smoke in your face? Can you turn the food without bumping your hand on the food warmer? Do the controls get too hot?

PRODUCT	PERFORMANCE			FEATURES					SPECIFICATIONS	
Brand / model (in rank order)	Overall score (%)	Cooking score (%)	Ease of use score (%)	Ignition type	Warming rack	Side burner	Reversible cooking plate	Glass viewing panel in hood	Dimensions (cm, W x D x H)*	Contact
Beefmaster BMH4CS	82	88	74	Piezo (B)	√	√	√		168 x 64 x 118 (88)	02 9704 4177; Barbeques Galore
Sunbeam Innovo GB5100 (A)	82	93	66	Electronic	√	√	√		172 x 62 x 116 (92)	02 9695 9999; Sunbeam
BeefEater Discovery Package 19845	78	83	70	Piezo (B)	√	√		√	150 x 59 x 115 (80)	02 9724 8872; Woodland Home Products
Jumbuck B38 Endevour 4 MK II	67	67	68	Piezo (B)	√	√	√		177 x 68 x 121 (94)	03 8831 9812; Bunnings
Let's Live Outdoors Classic M55	67	68	66	Piezo	√	√			175 x 64 x 121 (92)	03 9703 4200; Mitre 10
Cordon Bleu CDH4C	65	63	68	Piezo	√			√	178 x 59 x 121 (90)	02 9704 4177; Barbeques Galore
Jackeroo Professional 4 Titanium	59	52	70	Piezo		√	√		161 x 69 x 118 (90)	03 9829 3111; Kmart

BEEFEATER Discovery Package 19845

PRICE $999

GOOD POINTS

- Excellent for roasting a chicken and cooking steak.
- Controls are large and clearly labelled.
- Accurate thermometer.
- Glass viewing panel in the hood.

BAD POINTS

- Cooked sausages unevenly.
- The stainless steel hood, side tables and control panel require extra attention when cleaning.
- You need to remove the food warmer to have good open access to food.
- The protective film on stainless steel areas is very difficult to remove.
- No handles on the side table — it's uncomfortable to grip when moving the barbecue.

USING THE TABLE

Scores The overall score is made up of:

- Cooking performance: 60%
- Ease of use: 40%

Cooking performance

- The scores for cooking steak, sausages and roast chicken were weighted equally.

Ease of use Equally weighted scores for:

- Ease of cooking.
- Mobility.
- Ease of using controls.
- Ease of cleaning.
- Ease of fitting the gas bottle.

TABLE NOTES

** Dimensions are with the hood closed and include knobs, wheels and handles. The height from the floor to the hotplate is shown in brackets.*
(A) Discontinued, but still available in limited quantities. It's been replaced by the G85100M.
(B) With jet/pilot flame.

About the rest

Most of the other barbecues scored similarly to the models in the *What to buy* list for ease of use, but were all let down by uneven cooking in the sausage or steak tests:

- The JUMBUCK was very good at cooking steak and roast chicken.
- The LET'S LIVE OUTDOORS was very good at roasting a chicken and good at cooking steak.
- The CORDON BLEU was excellent at roasting chicken, but only scored 60% for cooking steak.
- The JACKEROO was the worst at cooking steak — the result was very uneven and scored only 40% — and not quite as good at roasting chicken as the others.

HOW WE TESTED

Cooking tests

Our tester cooked steak and sausages with the hood open, and turned them only once while cooking. This fairly severe test is to check how evenly the cooking surface is heated; at home you'd probably compensate for uneven hotter and cooler spots by moving the food around.

She cooked the whole chicken on a rack in the centre of the plates with the hood down, and again turned it only once. Cooking in this way is comparable to cooking in an oven and is also suitable for fish and larger cuts of meat, such as roasts.

Ease of use

Ease of cooking is the most important factor, mainly including ease of access when moving and turning the food, and any discomfort, such as smoke blowing into your face. Our tester also looked at moving and cleaning the barbecue, how easy the controls are to use, and how easy it is to fit the gas bottle.

Barbecues can be difficult and time-consuming to assemble — don't buy one on Saturday morning and expect to be using it in the afternoon.

Price ($)
599
999
999
399
449
899
599

Get smart

Can a smart phone combine the convenience of a mobile, the breadth of a PDA and more, all in just one package?

nutshell

▶ Smart phones let you email, browse the net, write notes, view documents, store photos, video and music and more, as well as making a good old-fashioned phone call.

▶ While many devices fall into the 'smart phone' category, they have different features, applications, sizes and ways of operating. You'll need to work out how and where you'd use one before choosing a model.

Fancy a single pocket-sized device to replace your mobile phone, PDA, GPS, MP3 player and even, possibly, your laptop?

Not too long ago, a phone was considered smart if it could connect to your PC to update a contact list or take a photo, no matter how bad, and send it to a friend. Now the latest 'smart' phones on the market can do all this and a whole lot more. However, everyone has a different opinion as to what exactly a smart phone is. For some, a keyboard and the ability to email and organise a contact list are essential to earn the name, while for others it's being able to seamlessly connect to the internet via a wireless connection.

Lately there's been a demand for smart phones to act as navigation devices, so you can find that new restaurant or shop while you're on the run. But while all these bells and whistles sound good, might the rush to make these devices 'jacks of all trades' actually have made them master of none?

We tested 12 of the latest smart phones available on the market, as well as giving you a sneak peek into how the soon-to-be released Apple iPhone fared under our test conditions. >

About the rest

- Our testers didn't like the SAMSUNG SGH-i600's difficult-to-use keyboard and old operating system and applications.
- BLACKBERRY, which not so long ago was the pick of the bunch in smart phones, didn't rate well comparatively in our test. Our testers found the BLACKBERRY 8800 and 8300 keyboards small and fiddly to use and they described the rollerball used on the phone for web browsing as feeling wobbly and difficult to control. Also, while the 8800 has GPS functionality built in, Australian maps aren't included in the package.
- With a smallish screen and setup similar to a regular slide mobile phone, the NOKIA 6110 Navigator wasn't so useful for large data entry, although the navigation system was acceptable and it comes with a full set of Australian maps.
- The HTC Touch seems to imitate the APPLE iPhone but relies on a less than effective touch system, or you have to operate it with the stylus provided. Our testers thought it didn't shine as a smart phone but worked OK as a regular mobile phone.
- The MOTOROLA Q9 is a very wide phone with a clear screen. However, the keyboard is disappointing and Wi-Fi isn't available with this model.
- The PALM Treo 750 rated the worst on test, with a cramped keyboard that's difficult to use, and slow response times.

PHOTOGRAPH: THINKSTOCK

AN APPLE A DAY ... RATES VERY WELL

When Apple launched the iPhone in the US earlier this year, people queued in the street for days to be the first to get their hands on this shiny, sexy piece of new technology. The word is that the iPhone won't be available for sale in Australia until sometime in 2008, although some keen consumers have already bought their phones overseas and hacked the system (illegally, of course) to use them on local networks. But our overseas testing partners put the European version of the iPhone through its paces to see how it compares to the other phones in this test.

The iPhone compared favourably, rating as the best model overall. The testers liked the design, which incorporates many of the ease-of-use features found in Apple's iPod music players. It rated well for playing music and as a PDA (with a strong set of office applications), and was acceptable as a phone. On the downside, it isn't suitable for someone who likes a proper keyboard (it's on the touchscreen) or for entering large amounts of data. But with a revolutionary design and what's likely to be a very reasonable price if the US is anything to go by, the iPhone is set to be as popular in Australia as it has been overseas. It's not included in our *What to buy* list because, well, you can't buy it here yet.

PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF APPLE

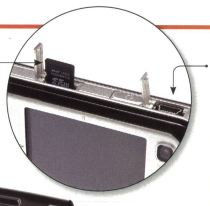
What to look for

USEFUL FEATURES

- **Wi-Fi capability** This allows you to browse the internet and send emails using your existing Wi-Fi connection at home or at any Wi-Fi hotspots when you're out and about. This generally costs a lot less than using mobile phone networks.
- **Accessories included** Look for a model that comes with all the accessories you consider necessary as part of the package. Beware of non-inclusive, expensive extras that you'd need to fully enjoy your phone. For example, some of the phones listed in the table with MP3 player capabilities didn't come supplied with special headphones, nor did they work with standard headphones. Specific headphones would have to be bought at an extra cost.
- **Stereo Bluetooth (A2DP)** support enables a pair of Bluetooth headphones to communicate with the phone, delivering stereo music wirelessly to the user.
- **Really Simple Syndication (RSS)** is an easy way to get updates from your favourite websites delivered automatically to your phone. Many websites (including choice.com.au) now feature RSS feeds.
- **HSDPA (also known as 3.5G)** offers faster network performance than 3G, the current network speed king. This means faster video and music downloads to your mobile phone.

REMOVABLE MEMORY

This lets you insert a memory card and take your data elsewhere, without relying on the phone alone.



MINI USB CONNECTION

This makes it easy to sync your smart phone with your PC using an inexpensive cable that will also work with most other digital devices, such as cameras, card readers and video cameras.

LARGE SCREEN/GOOD RESOLUTION

There's not much point being able to browse the internet or open documents if you can't see them properly, so look for a decent-sized screen with a high resolution.

KEYBOARD

Some phones come with tiny keyboard buttons, others fold out or slide open like a mini laptop, while others rely on a touchscreen or a stylus pen. Think about how you'd like to use your phone. If you write long emails and notes, a touchscreen might be time-consuming and frustrating. If you have big hands, tiny keys will be far too fiddly to use properly.

PHOTOGRAPHY: GENE ROSS

PRODUCT		PERFORMANCE						FEATURES								
Brand / model (in rank order)	3G	Overall score (%)	Phone score (%)	Smart score (%)	Charging time (hr:min)	Time in use for phone calls (hr:min)	Time in use with display on (hr:min)	Keyboard	Touchscreen	GPS receiver built-in	USB (mini)	Charging via USB possible	Mass storage device*	Bluetooth A2DP	Wi-Fi capability	Stereo headset supplied	Standard headphone jack connectable
Apple iPhone		81	72	89	2:00	5:00	6:54		√			√			√	√	3.5 mm
Nokia E90 Communicator	√	78	77	79	2:00	9:06	13:00	√		√	√		√	√	√	√	2.5 mm
Nokia E61i	√	78	78	78	2:10	8:24	13:18	√					√		√		
Nokia N95	√	76	81	71	1:13	5:54	15:12			√	√		√	√	√	√	3.5 mm
Nokia E65	√	74	77	70	1:30	5:36	15:00						√		√	√	
Sony Ericsson P1i	√	70	79	60	2:35	8:30	10:12	√	√			√	√	√	√	√	
Samsung SGH-i600 (A)	√	67	76	58	4:00	9:24	14:00	√				√	√	√	√	√	
BlackBerry 8800		65	76	53	3:40	8:06	17:42	√		√	√	√	√				2.5 mm
Nokia 6110 Navigator	√	65	71	59	1:26	5:12	8:06			√	√		√	√		√	2.5 mm
HTC P3450 Touch (A)		64	76	51	2:15	7:42	9:12		√		√	√	√	√	√	√	
Motorola Q9	√	64	74	53	2:18	7:54	6:00	√							√	√	
BlackBerry 8300		63	73	53	2:40	6:42	15:18	√			√		√	√		√	3.5 mm
Palm Treo 750	√	61	75	46	2:20	5:18	15:00	√	√						√	√	2.5 mm

What to buy

NOKIA E90 Communicator

PRICE $1500

GOOD POINTS

- Large easy-to-use keyboard with clever hinge design.
- Large, high-resolution screen.
- Strong integration with Microsoft Office applications such as Word and Excel.
- Built-in GPS receiver.
- Bluetooth stereo.
- Good camera performance.
- Easy Wi-Fi setup.

BAD POINTS

- The heaviest model in the test.
- The most expensive.
- Australian maps aren't included and need to be purchased and downloaded.

NOKIA E61i

PRICE $789

GOOD POINTS

- Large clear screen, ideal for web browsing.
- Well-spaced keyboard is good for data entry.
- Strong integration with Microsoft Office applications such as Word and Excel.
- Easy Wi-Fi setup.

BAD POINTS

- Bulky handset.
- No headphones supplied.
- No Bluetooth stereo.

NOKIA N95

PRICE $1049

GOOD POINTS

- Strong integration with Microsoft Office applications such as Word and Excel.
- 5 megapixel camera and good camera performance.
- Built-in GPS receiver.
- Maps included for Australia.
- Bluetooth stereo.
- Easy Wi-Fi setup

BAD POINTS

- Not as good as keyboard models for data entry.
- Construction not as sturdy as the other top performers.

NOKIA E65

PRICE $899

GOOD POINTS

- Strong integration with Microsoft Office applications such as Word and Excel.
- Good camera performance.
- Easy to set up and use as a phone.
- Easy Wi-Fi setup.

BAD POINTS

- Not as good as keyboard models for data entry.
- No Bluetooth stereo.

SONY ERICSSON P1i

PRICE $1099

GOOD POINTS

- Good all-round performer.
- Bluetooth stereo.
- Good music player and camera performance.
- Touchscreen.
- Can capture an image of a business card and convert it to contact data.

BAD POINTS

- Unusual keyboard setup makes data entry cumbersome
- Wi-Fi can be fiddly to set up.

There's a demand for smart phones to act as navigation devices, so you can find that new restaurant or shop while you're on the run.

PROFILES UCRT

HOW WE TESTED

The phone alone

- The CHOICE testers checked the basic 'concept' of the smart phones, assessing the ergonomics and the battery performance of each while using different functions, such as Wi-Fi or during different network situations, on standby and when making a call. They also checked each model's weight, portability and volume.
- They tested the performance of each device as a phone, measuring sound quality, network sensitivity and convenience, making and receiving calls, memory dialling from the keypad and the display quality during a call.
- Our testers also looked at standard 'bells and 'whistles' — extras on the phones such as SMS, cameras and digital music players were all individually assessed for performance.

Smart as...

- The additional tests for the phones' 'smarts' included testing the function of the phone as a PDA: assessing how easy it was to enter and edit data, browse lots of data and navigate around it. Our testers checked the speed at which each phone responded and the quality of the different software supplied, such as email, web browsers, calendar and contacts.
- They checked each phone's ability to sync with a computer and integrate things such as mailboxes.
- Wireless use was tested by setting up data connections using Wi-Fi and on other networks, by setting up and using email and web browsing.
- The phones' navigation systems were put through their paces, with our testers assessing the overall navigation package, the quality of the screen, sound and ease of navigating when in use

If you write long emails and notes, a touch-screen might be time-consuming and very frustrating.

USING THE TABLE

Scores The overall score is made up of:

- Phone score: 50%.
- Smart score: 50%.

Features See *What to look for*, left, for an explanation of features in the table.

TABLE NOTES

** Can be used as a removable drive on a computer.*
na Not applicable: the iPhone has 8192 MB of internal memory and doesn't take a memory card.
(A) Discontinued, but may still be available in some shops.
(B) No camera.
(C) Based on the US price — you can't buy it in Australia yet.

SPECIFICATIONS

...y card (MB)	Internal memory (MB)	Removable memory type	VOIP possible	RSS reader	Operating system	Camera resolution (megapixels)	Screen dimensions (mm)	HSDPA or 3.5G	Weight (g)	Dimensions (mm, H x W x D)	Contact	Price ($)
	8192	na		√	OS X 1.00	2.0	50 x 75		144	115 x 61 x 12	www.apple.com	499 (C)
2	128	MicroSD	√	√	Symbian; Nokia S60	3.2	91 x 40	√	212	132 x 57 x 20	www.nokia.com.au	1500
56	64	MicroSD	√	√	Symbian; Nokia S60	2.0	57 x 43		148	117 x 70 x 14	www.nokia.com.au	789
024	160	MicroSD	√	√	Symbian; Nokia S60	5.0	39 x 53	√	121	99 x 53 x 21	www.nokia.com.au	1049
56	50	MicroSD	√	√	Symbian; Nokia S60	2.0	33 x 44		116	105 x 49 x 16	www.nokia.com.au	699
2	160	MS Micro		√	Symbian	3.2	39 x 52		129	106 x 55 x 15	www.sonyericsson.com.au/	1099
	35	MicroSD	√	√	Windows Mobile 5	1.3	46 x 35	√	125	113 x 59 x 12	www.samsung.com.au	799
	64	MicroSD		√	BlackBerry	(B)	50 x 37		133	114 x 66 x 14	www.optus.com.au	950
2	40	MicroSD		√	Symbian; Nokia S60	2.0	33 x 44	√	126	101 x 49 x 20	www.nokia.com.au	759
024	64	MicroSD		√	Windows Mobile 6	2.0	43 x 57		113	100 x 58 x 14	www.htc.com	699
2	100	MicroSD			Windows Mobile 6	2.0	49 x 37	√	134	118 x 67 x 12	www.motorola.com/au/	999
28	64	MicroSD			BlackBerry	2.0	50 x 37		110	107 x 60 x 15	www.optus.com.au	740
	128	MiniSD			Windows Mobile 5	1.3	43 x 43	√	153	111 x 58 x 22	www.palm.com.au	1199

Store before you pour

A wine fridge is a better option than your garage, but the models we tested are far from perfect — especially when it comes to energy consumption.

nutshell

- We've included three models in the *What to buy* list — but they all have drawbacks.
- When pushed to their cooling limits, energy consumption for the thermoelectric wine fridges was more than for a new 520 L fridge/freezer.

The Australian summer is great for barbecues and days at the beach, but it certainly doesn't provide the best climate for wine storage, with ideal storing temperatures generally being around 12–16°C (typical temperatures found in a cellar). Wine should also be stored in the dark, with a humidity level around 70% or so (so the cork doesn't dry out). Temperatures should never become so hot as to spoil the wine or reduce its quality as it matures, and it's always better to go too cold (but not freeze) than too hot.

If your house gets hotter than around 25°C and you're keen to cultivate a collection of fine wine, a wine fridge is certainly an option. As our tests revealed, it's not a perfect one, but if your home is a really unsuitable temperature it's probably better than nothing.

Wine fridges (technically wine cabinets, but we'll stick with the common term) are different from a standard fridge, as their job is to control humidity and maintain stable temperatures between 12°C and 18°C (different temperatures for different wines). You might even want it colder sometimes to serve some wines straight from it. A bar fridge isn't a good alternative for wine storage: they're usually too cold and you can't adjust them to be warmer; they tend to have very large temperature fluctuations; they don't control humidity; and the temperature can change considerably when the external temperature varies. Plus they don't have purpose-built bottle shelves.

There are different types of wine fridge, with prices ranging from quite low to extremely high. CHOICE chose four compressor and two thermoelectric models, costing from less than $200 to well over $4000, that claim to be suitable for cellaring and short-term storage (and some for readying wine for serving, depending on the temperature you set them to). All models are less than 85 cm high (so can fit under a kitchen bench) and they can accommodate between 28 and 47 standard bottles.

KEEPING YOUR WINE

Here are some hints on storing your wine, if a wine fridge isn't on the cards:

- Store it out of the sun and away from sources of direct heat and cold.
- Never store wine in a garage (they're usually poorly insulated and can get very hot from the car's engine).
- Store it in a well protected area — not in a draughty or well ventilated space that's likely to get hot or cold breezes frequently.
- An area near the centre of a home is best, away from hot external walls, heaters, ovens, etc, and preferably low down to get the coolest air.
- Putting wine in well-sealed foam boxes or similar can insulate it from changes in air temperature.
- Use a min/max thermometer to check what temperatures you're getting where your wine is stored.
- Find a place that's likely to get the least variation in temperature — both day to night and summer to winter. Fast temperature change inside the bottles is worse for the wine than slow.

The limitations

Our testers found that none of the tested models is very good for all aspects of storing/cellaring wine. Some have major limitations, and even the models in the *What to buy* list have at least one aspect that's not desirable.

The top-scoring model, the LIEBHERR, doesn't hold the temperatures as stable as it should, particularly during changes in external ('ambient') temperature, and with a price tag of $4700, you'd really be expecting better.

The VINTEC is less expensive (but still $1600) and is good at staying constant with changes in external temperature, but it's let down by continuous temperature fluctuations as the compressor stops and starts. Large temperature fluctuations mean the wine can repeatedly expand and contract in the bottle, which may damage the cork seal and cause the wine to deteriorate faster than it should.

The $200 HOMEMAKER also has some temperature variations when the compressor starts and stops, but more significantly copes poorly with external temperature change. However, it's considerably

PHOTOGRAPHY: PETER, FISHER

cheaper than the top two models, and if you can protect it from extremes of heat (keep it below 32°C external temperature) and cold, or monitor it and adjust the temperature as required, it could do the job.

Of the other three models, the TRANSTHERM has some good points, but its ability to reach cooler temperatures is limited and it's worse than the HOMEMAKER for being unable to cope with external temperature change — and it costs $2500 more. The DOME and RANK ARENA, both thermoelectric models, have significant energy consumption problems when pushed to their cooling capacity.

Energy issues

All these wine cabinets have disproportionately high energy consumption when compared to fridge/freezers, especially considering that those need to maintain much lower temperatures (for the wine fridges' energy use, see the table, page 46).

In the case of the thermoelectric models, their energy use skyrockets when they're pushed to their cooling limits. The bottom-ranking RANK ARENA used 619 kWh/year in an external temperature of 25°C, without even achieving a temperature of 12°C inside the cabinet. Compare this with a popular 520 L fridge/freezer, which only uses around 520 kWh/year and can maintain 3°C and –15°C in its two compartments in 32°C heat. So while the thermoelectric models are relatively cheap to buy, this is offset by their high running costs over the long term, and of course their excessive effect on the environment.

Wine cabinets should need to use much less energy than similar-sized fridges to meet their temperature requirements. The energy consumption of fridges has been considerably reduced since the introduction of the mandatory MEPS (Minimum Energy Performance Standard). Wine fridges/cabinets aren't currently covered by MEPS or even a specific Australian standard; CHOICE thinks they should be, so they'd be forced to make large energy efficiency gains.

Vibration

Like normal fridges, all the compressor-type wine cabinets vibrate somewhat, particularly when the compressor runs. Whether vibration 'agitates' and affects the quality of wine is contentious. CHOICE couldn't find any definitive evidence about the effect of vibration on the maturation of wine, regardless of the degree. However, some anecdotal information suggests that increased vibration during cellaring is probably detrimental to some extent, so we included a vibration test in order to give the information to people who think it's important — see the table for results. We didn't include vibration in the score, though.

The testers took vibration measurements of the wine fridges over time. For compressor models, starts and stops as well as normal running were included.

The HOMEMAKER vibrates a lot when the compressor stops and starts — when it kicks in, the whole fridge shakes noticeably. So if you subscribe to the view that vibration is detrimental to wine, avoid that model.

The thermoelectric cooling systems are claimed to be free of vibration, but it still occurs (to a lesser extent) from the fan. >

Our testers found that none of the tested models is good at all aspects of storing wine. Some have major limitations.

What to buy

LIEBHERR Vinidor WTUes 1653	$4699
VINTEC V40SG "e"	$1599
HOMEMAKER 40 Bottle Wine Cooler HMTW-16EQ	$199

These three wine fridges all have some problems — the HOMEMAKER more than the other two, but the $199 price tag may help compensate. See *The limitations*, far left, and the profiles, page 46, for details.

HOW WE TESTED

There's no standard for wine fridges/cabinets, so our testers devised a variation of the Australian fridge standard, based on wine storage ideals.

- They checked the temperature operation range for the wine cabinets' ability to operate in external conditions ranging from 10°C to 40°C.
- They measured temperature fluctuations to see if the cabinets maintain steady temperatures over the short term as the cooling system cycles.
- 'Ambient change' tests how well the temperature inside the wine cabinets was maintained when the outside temperature changed (such as from winter to summer), with the controls untouched.
- The testers also measured the cabinets' humidity in a relatively dry environment.
- They measured energy for cooling in an ambient temperature of 25°C, to achieve a set internal temperature of 14°C. Our testers also measured energy use with a set temperature of 12°C or, if that wasn't achievable, at the coldest setting the cabinet could achieve. The score is based on both tests, taking into account bottle capacity.
- To check vibration, they measured the maximum three-dimensional acceleration on a lightly loaded shelf.

All these wine cabinets have high energy use when compared to fridge/freezers — and those have to maintain an even lower temperature.

Profiles

LIEBHERR Vinidor WTUes 1653

PRICE $4699

It doesn't have 'finished' panels — it has to be built in.

GOOD POINTS

- Provides a very good range of temperature choices in external conditions between 10°C and 40°C.
- Able to heat up in order to maintain set temperatures in cold conditions.
- Able to maintain good levels of humidity in moderately dry conditions.
- Has two compartments that can be independently temperature-controlled.
- Can fit 18 larger bottles (such as sparkling wine) without reducing the total number of bottles that fit.

BAD POINTS

- Internal temperatures fluctuate somewhat when external conditions change.
- High energy use, compared to normal fridges.
- Very expensive.

PHOTOGRAPHY: IRENE RUSS

VINTEC V40SG "e"

PRICE $1599

GOOD POINTS

- Provides a very good range of temperature choices in external conditions between 10°C and 40°C, and maintains set temperatures as the external temperature changes.
- Maintains good levels of humidity in moderately dry conditions.
- Can fit seven larger bottles without reducing the total number of bottles that fit.

BAD POINTS

- Poor at maintaining steady temperatures as the compressor goes through its cycle.
- High energy use, compared to normal fridges.

PRODUCT		PERFORMANCE						
Brand / model (in rank order)	Type	Overall score (%)	Temperature operation range score (%)	Temperature fluctuations score (%)	Energy efficiency score (%)	Ambient change score (%)	Humidity score (%)	Measured energy at 14°C in 25°C conditions (kWh/year)
Liebherr Vinidor WTUes 1653 (A)	Compressor	71	91	65	52	65	75	402
Vintec V40SG "e"	Compressor	66	88	30	56	90	75	324
Transtherm Studio Integrable 1T	Compressor	52	55	85	48	0	45	304
Homemaker 40 Bottle Wine Cooler HMTW-16EQ	Compressor	44	58	40	52	5	50	299
Dome 24 Bottles Wine Cooler 900192 (B)	Thermoelectric	41	32	95	13	0	55	279
Rank Arena 28 Bottle Thermoelectric Wine Cellar RAWC28 (B)	Thermoelectric	36	29	95	0	0	35	449

HOMEMAKER 40 Bottle Wine Cooler HMTW-16EQ

PRICE $199

GOOD POINTS

- The range of temperature choices is good at milder external temperatures.

BAD POINTS

- The range of temperatures it can achieve is poor in more extreme (10°C and 40°C) external conditions.
- Poor at maintaining steady temperatures as the compressor goes through its cycle.
- Set temperatures can rise significantly in very warm conditions.
- High energy use compared to normal fridges.
- A lot of vibration as the compressor starts and stops.

About the rest

- Despite its $2700 price tag, the TRANSTHERM was unable to reach suitable temperatures in 40°C external conditions and couldn't maintain set temperatures when the external temperature changed. It can heat up and maintain set temperatures in cool conditions, though, so if you can protect it from external heat, it should do the job.
- The two thermoelectric models, the DOME and RANK ARENA, don't have a compressor and associated temperature fluctuations, but at best could only cool to around 12–13°C less than the room temperature. They also suffered from very high energy use when pushed to their limits. However, if your home doesn't get hotter than 32°C or colder than 10°C, they may suit you.

USING THE TABLE

Scores The overall score is made up of:

- Temperature operation range: 30%
- Temperature fluctuations: 25%
- Energy efficiency: 20%
- Ambient change: 15%
- Cabinet humidity: 10%

Vibration Measured in metres per second squared, but not scored; see page 45 for more.

Price Recommended retail, as of October 2007.

TABLE NOTES

** Rev = reversible.*

*** The maximum number of standard red-wine bottles we could fit.*

(A) This model must be built-in. It has two compartments that can be independently temperature-controlled.

(B) To be discontinued in January 2008.

(C) Adjustable legs allow a height range of 82–87 cm.

The Homemaker is much cheaper than the two top models, and as long as you can protect it from extremes of heat and cold, it could do the job.

								FEATURES		SPECIFICATIONS			
Measured energy at 12°C (or coldest setting) in 25°C conditions (kWh/year)	Coldest / warmest temperature in 10°C conditions (°C)	Coldest / warmest temperature in 25°C conditions (°C)	Coldest / warmest temperature in 32°C conditions (°C)	Coldest / warmest temperature in 40°C conditions (°C)	Noise (dB)	Vibration (m/sec²)	Temperature zones	Door hinge position*	Claimed / actual bottle capacity**	Dimensions (cm, H x W x D)	Contact	Price ($)
333	3 / 17	5 / 18	6 / 19	7 / 20	36	1.20	2 (A)	Rev	38 / 47	82–87 x 60 x 58 (C)	www.andico.com.au	4699
366	6 / 13	5 / 19	5 / 19	5 / 18	40	1.57	1	Rev	40 / 46	82 x 60 x 58	www.transtherm.com.au	1599
311 (13.8°C)	10 / 18	14 / 22	15 / 23	23 / 25	<26	1.02	1	Rev	30 / 36	65 x 54 x 56	www.transtherm.com.au	2700
366	9 / 10	7 / 20	12 / 19	19 / 19	37	5.78	1	Rev	40 / 42	84 x 50 x 56	1800 634 251; Kmart	199
509 (12.3°C)	8 / 8	12 / 17	19 / 19	27 / 27	30	0.15	1	L or R	24 / 28	74 x 47 x 55	1800 814 788; Target	299
519 (13.6°C)	8 / 9	14 / 18	20 / 20	28 / 28	35	0.18	1	Rev	28 / 28	74 x 47 x 55	1800 251 311; Big W	188

A zoom with a view

Since our last test, high-definition camcorders have hit the market — should you buy one?

nutshell

▶ 'High definition' is the buzzword of the moment — but unless you have an HD television, don't waste your money on an HD camcorder.

▶ Our top standard-definition models have picture quality comparable to that of a DVD player.

CHOICE looked at the latest batch of camcorders — including the new generation of models that deliver high-definition (HD) video. HD, not to be confused with the ability to shoot video at a 16:9 aspect ratio (which most new camcorders have), means a higher-resolution picture — but only when shown on an appropriate screen.

The video quality these new HD camcorders produce is undoubtedly better than anything a standard-definition camcorder can deliver — so much so that we used a broadcast-quality camcorder as a comparison when judging their picture quality (see *How we tested*, page 51).

These HD camcorders can record video at a resolution of 1920 x 1080 pixels, also known as 1080i, which is a significantly higher picture quality than virtually all old-style TVs in lounge rooms around Australia can reproduce. In fact, many plasma and LCD screens can't show video at 1080i quality, so if you feel your next camcorder needs to capture video in HD, make sure your TV can reproduce it (look for statements such as 'full HD' or '1080i' if you're buying a new TV as well). Otherwise you're just wasting your money.

Our test found four standard-definition and two high-definition models that you should be happy with, depending on your budget and your needs. While the picture quality of the SD camcorders can't be compared to the HD models, the top-scoring SD models have picture quality similar to that of a DVD player — which should be more than adequate for catching the children's backyard antics.

What system do you want?

Digital video camcorders are now virtually the only choice. However, the wide variety of system options available — including mini-DV tape, recordable DVD, hard-drive-based models, as well as HD — don't make it a straightforward purchase. So what system is right for you?

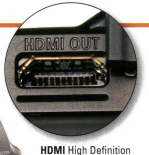
- **MiniDV** A standard tape can store 60 minutes of high-quality video, and you can also get 80-minute tapes.
- **Hard disc drive (HDD)** Can record over seven hours of high-quality SD video on a 30 GB or 40 GB hard disc. You need to use the software that comes with the camcorder to edit your recordings on a computer.
- **DVD** DVD models use an 8 cm DVD-RAM, DVD-RW/DVD+RW or DVD-R/DVD+R to record video and photos (see the table for which models can record on which disc type). All but the DVD-R/DVD+R and dual-layer (DL) discs can be recorded on many times. The DVD-RAM can store 36 minutes of video on the best-quality setting (18 minutes on each side, and you have to turn the disc), the others only 20 minutes. >

What to look for

USEFUL FEATURES

- A **wind filter** improves sound quality in windy conditions.
- An **external battery charger** allows you to carry on filming with a fully charged battery while charging a flat one.
- A **charge-coupled device (CCD)** is a chip that turns pictures into digital signals. Some (including our top three SD models) have three — one for each primary colour — while most have one.
- A **wide-aspect (16:9) screen** shows your video as it will look on your plasma or LCD TV.
- **USB version** In the past, USB connections were much slower, as the older USB 1.1 standard was used. Now most new camcorders have a much faster USB 2.0 standard, which delivers similar performance to Firewire when transferring video from the camera to your computer. (Firewire is a DV transfer standard still used on MiniDV camcorders.)
- An **external microphone** usually provides better sound quality than a built-in one. So if good audio quality is important to you, make sure the camcorder allows you to connect one.
- **Quick review** lets you play back the previous scene at the touch of a button.

A **removable card** such as SD card, to store photos and web-quality video.



HDMI High Definition Multimedia Interface is a new connection option that's available on most HD camcorders and delivers digital video and audio via a single cable — with no loss of quality — to a compatible TV or home theatre system.

What to buy

Standard definition

PANASONIC SDR-H250

PRICE $1209
SYSTEM HDD
GOOD POINTS
- Good picture quality for video and OK for photos.
- 3 CCDs (see *What to look for*, page 48).
- Easy to record and play back.
- Widescreen (16:9) aspect ratio.
- Good set of video applications.
- Equal-highest audio score.
- 138 minutes' recording time.
- Clear directions for joystick use.
- External battery charger.
- Excellent battery score.

BAD POINTS
- Small optical zoom.

CANON DC230

PRICE $829
SYSTEM DVD
GOOD POINTS
- Very good picture quality.
- Very good battery score.
- Easy to record and play back.
- Widescreen (16:9) aspect ratio.
- Good set of video applications.
- Takes only 2.6 seconds to be ready from 'off'.

BAD POINTS
- Very poor-quality video in low light using 'auto' mode.
- Poor-quality still photos.
- Disappointing sound quality.

PANASONIC NV-GS230

PRICE $989
SYSTEM MiniDV
GOOD POINTS
- Good low-light performance.
- 3 CCDs.
- Good set of video applications.
- Has webcam mode.
- External battery charger.
- Fast USB connection.

BAD POINTS
- Small optical zoom range.
- No S-video output.

PANASONIC VDR-D310

PRICE $1209
SYSTEM DVD
GOOD POINTS
- Good picture quality for video and OK for photos.
- 3 CCDs.
- Widescreen (16:9) aspect ratio.
- External battery charger.
- S-video output.

BAD POINTS
- Small optical zoom.

The picture quality of standard-definition camcorders is more than adequate for you to capture the kids' backyard antics.

High definition

CANON HV10

PRICE $1599
SYSTEM MiniDV
GOOD POINTS
- Very good autofocus score.
- Good picture quality.
- Widescreen (16:9) aspect ratio.
- Very good set of video applications.
- Playback is easy.

BAD POINTS
- Location of buttons and labelling could be better.
- Small optical zoom.
- No HDMI connection.
- Only 73 minutes' recording time.

CANON HV20

PRICE $1799
SYSTEM MiniDV
GOOD POINTS
- Good picture quality.
- 122 minutes' recording time.
- Excellent set of video applications.
- Widescreen (16:9) aspect ratio.
- Playback is easy.

BAD POINTS
- Small optical zoom.
- Location of buttons could be better.

PRODUCT	PERFORMANCE									FEATURES								
Brand / model (in rank order)	Overall score (%)	Picture quality score (%)	Ease of use score (%)	Sound quality score (%)	Still photo score (%)	Versatility score (%)	Autofocus score (%)	Battery score (%)	Remote control	External battery charger	Photo flash / video lamp	Still photo primary memory type	PictBridge support	Image resolution (megapixels)	USB version	Night shot (IR light)	Quick review
STANDARD DEFINITION																	
Panasonic SDR-H250 (A)	71	74	72	68	59	74	56	95	√	√	–/√	SD, SDHC	√	2.0	2		
Canon DC230	66	80	64	48	44	71	49	81	√		–/–	Mini-SD	√	1.0	2		√
Panasonic NV-GS230	66	68	69	64	55	74	46	62	√	√	–/–	SD	√	2.32	2		√
Panasonic VDR-D310	66	70	64	63	58	65	64	73	√	√	–/–	SD, SDHC	√	3.1	2		
Canon DC51	64	71	62	40	58	74	85	62	√		√/√	Mini-SD	√	5.04	2		√
Sony DCR-DVD908	64	67	61	58	56	75	67	63	√		√/–	Memory Stick Duo / Pro Duo	√	6.08	2	√	
Sony DCR-HC48	63	59	65	61	41	82	78	84	√		–/–	Memory Stick Duo / Pro Duo	√	1.0	1	√	√
Canon MD160	61	66	64	43	43	79	63	71	√		–/√	SD, SDHC, MMC	√	1.0	1		√
Sony DCR-HC28	61	56	61	60	nt	63	83	77			–/–	None		na	na	√	√
Hitachi DZ-HS500E	60	57	66	63	30	77	48	80		√	–/√	SD, mini-SD, micro-SD		0.31	2		√
Panasonic NV-GS60	59	52	65	56	nt	60	77	73		√	–/–	None		na	1		√
Panasonic SDR-H20 (A)	59	54	68	61	31	73	70	76		√	–/–	SD, SDHC	√	0.31	2		
Panasonic VDR-D220 (A)	59	55	70	62	30	71	67	62		√	–/–	SD, SDHC	√	0.31	2		
Sony DCR-DVD708	58	57	59	62	35	71	66	62	√		–/–	Memory Stick Duo / Pro Duo	√	1.0	2	√	
JVC GZ-MG275	57	52	67	55	52	70	43	61	√		√/–	SD	√	2.0	2		
JVC GZ-MG575	56	42	71	68	52	73	29	63	√		√/√	SD	√	5.04	2		
Sony DCR-DVD608	56	54	59	60	28	67	75	67			–/–	Memory Stick Duo / Pro Duo	√	0.31	2	√	
JVC GZ-MG135	55	48	66	59	38	72	26	70	√		–/√	SD	√	0.31	2		
Canon MD120	54	47	64	41	41	75	71	75			–/–	SD, SDHC, MMC	√	0.79	1		√
Samsung VP-D371	46	30	56	56	nt	57	40	80			–/–	None		na	na		√
HIGH DEFINITION																	
Canon HV10	69	70	70	56	56	89	83	59	√		√/√	MiniSD	√	3.15	2		√
Canon HV20	69	71	64	56	59	91	67	88	√		√/√	MiniSD	√	3.15	2		√
Sony HDR-HC5 (A)	65	61	66	59	59	87	54	78	√		√/–	Memory Stick Duo / Pro Duo	√	3.98	1	√	√
Sony HDR-SR7 (A)	64	69	61	52	61	85	48	66	√		√/–	Memory Stick Duo / Pro Duo	√	6.08	2	√	
JVC GZ-HD7	59	51	64	71	58	78	31	59	√		–/–	SD, SDHC		2.07	2		

USING THE TABLE

Scores The overall score is made up of:

- Picture quality: 35%
- Ease of use: 20%
- Sound quality: 15%
- Still photos: 10%
- Versatility: 10%
- Autofocus: 5%
- Battery: 5%

Features See *What to look for*, page 48.

System See *What system do you want?*, page 48.

TABLE NOTES

na Not applicable.
nt Not tested (can't take still photos).
(A) Discontinued, but may still be available in some shops.

About the rest

STANDARD DEFINITION

- The CANON DC51 scored well for picture quality but was let down by a poor sound quality score and has a recording time of less than 85 minutes.
- The PANASONIC NV-GS60, PANASONIC SDR-H20, JVC GZ-MG275, SONY DCR-DVD608, JVC GZ-MG575, JVC-MG135, CANON MD120 and the SAMSUNG VP-D371 all scored less than 55% for picture quality and some also take poor still photos (see the table for scores). The SAMSUNG and PANASONIC NV-GS60 can't take still photos.
- Their picture quality was OK, but the SONY DCR-DVD908, PANASONIC VDR-D220 and SONY DCR-DVD708 have a recording time under 85 minutes.
- The SONY DCR-HC28's picture quality was OK but it can't take still photos.
- The CANON MD160, SONY DCR-HC48 and HITACHI DZ-HS500E were OK for picture quality but poor for still photos. The HITACHI can record video to a 30 GB hard drive as well as DVD.

HIGH DEFINITION

- The SONY HDR-HC5 and HDR-SR7 are loaded with features but their picture quality isn't quite as good as the two models in the *What to buy* list.
- The JVC GZ-HD7 is the most expensive model tested, and while it has three CCDs and a good audio score, it only scored 51% for picture quality.

SPECIFICATIONS

System	HDMI connection	LCD screen size (mm, diagonal)	Aspect ratio	Weight (g)	Dimensions (mm, W x H x D)	Optical zoom range	Contact	Price ($)
30 GB HDD	na	67	16:9	480	140 x 80 x 85	10	www.panasonic.com.au	1209
DVD-R, DVD-R DL, DVD-RW	na	63	16:9	460	130 x 95 x 65	35	www.canon.com.au	829
MiniDV	na	62	4:3	460	134 x 76 x 80	10	www.panasonic.com.au	989
DVD-RAM, DVD-R, DVD-R DL, DVD-RW	na	67	16:9	580	151 x 94 x 83	10	www.panasonic.com.au	1209
DVD-R, DVD-R DL, DVD-RW	na	67	16:9	520	128 x 89 x 65	10	www.canon.com.au	1499
DVD-R, DVD+R, DVD+R DL, DVD-RW, DVD+RW	na	67	16:9	580	145 x 81 x 81	10	www.sony.com.au	1399
MiniDV	na	67	16:9	460	115 x 85 x 70	25	www.sony.com.au	699
MiniDV	na	67	16:9	440	118 x 90 x 62	35	www.canon.com.au	699
MiniDV	na	62	4:3	420	120 x 80 x 71	20	www.sony.com.au	429
80GB HDD, DVD-RAM, DVD-R, DVD-RW, DVD+RW	na	67	16:9	570	135 x 90 x 80	30	www.hitachi.com.au	1099
MiniDV	na	62	4:3	460	134 x 70 x 95	30	www.panasonic.com.au	499
80 GB HDD	na	67	16:9	470	140 x 80 x 85	32	www.panasonic.com.au	879
DVD-RAM, DVD-R, DVD-R DL, DVD-RW	na	67	16:9	580	155 x 95 x 90	32	www.panasonic.com.au	699
DVD-R, DVD+R, DVD+R DL, DVD-RW, DVD+RW	na	67	16:9	450	130 x 90 x 67	25	www.sony.com.au	799
40 GB HDD	na	67	16:9	420	111 x 72 x 80	10	www.jvc.com.au	1199
40 GB HDD or SD card flash memory	na	67	16:9	470	120 x 75 x 80	10	www.jvc.com.au	1549
DVD-R, DVD+R, DVD+R DL, DVD-RW, DVD+RW	na	62	4:3	440	131 x 89 x 67	40	www.sony.com.au	699
30 GB HDD	na	67	16:9	380	111 x 72 x 80	34	www.jvc.com.au	899
MiniDV	na	67	16:9	440	118 x 90 x 62	35	www.canon.com.au	549
MiniDV	na	60	4:3	420	125 x 95 x 75	34	www.samsung.com.au	349
MiniDV		67	16:9	500	105 x 105 x 60	10	www.canon.com.au	1599
MiniDV	√	68	16:9	600	140 x 80 x 105	10	www.canon.com.au	1799
MiniDV	√	67	16:9	610	133 x 80 x 95	10	www.sony.com.au	1799
0 GB HDD	√	67	16:9	620	147 x 75 x 90	10	www.sony.com.au	2349
0 GB HDD	√	69	16:9	730	185 x 80 x 100	10	www.jvc.com.au	2749

The wide variety of system options available makes choosing a camcorder far from straight-forward.

HOW WE TESTED

- For picture quality, a viewing panel assessed the resolution, sharpness, colour and overall image quality of recordings in daylight and artificial light. They also assessed macro recordings, recordings made in low light and (if applicable) at night, and checked how well the picture stabilisation function worked and whether it affected picture quality.
- The standard-definition camcorders were judged against a good-quality consumer camcorder, while the high-definition models were compared with a broadcast-quality camcorder.
- For ease of use, a panel looked at the instructions, the ease of operating various functions, the quality and functionality of the viewfinder, LCD monitor and remote control, portability, and data transfer to a computer. They also measured the time delay between switching on and being ready to use.
- For sound quality, a panel assessed the quality of speech and music recorded with the inbuilt and external microphones (if applicable). They also checked for any sensitivity to wind noise.
- For still photos, the panel assessed the quality of photos taken in daylight, the shutter delay and the transfer speed via USB. Camcorders that can't take still photos weren't penalised.
- For versatility, they assessed the camera against a list of about 50 features.
- They measured how long the batteries lasted on a recording and playback test cycle. For recording time, they set the camcorders to full-auto recording mode with the monitor, autofocus and image stabiliser switched on. The zoom was operated three times every five minutes until the battery was empty.

Where the hell am I?

A handheld GPS uses satellites to guide you through the bush — but don't rely on them alone!

nutshell

- Handheld GPS devices can help you get back from a long walk in the bush, but take along a compass, good map and some common sense — just in case.
- Saving waypoints along your journey can be invaluable for future visits, whether it's a dangerous cliff face to avoid, or a fantastic restaurant you stumbled upon in Bahrain.

An 'adventure' handheld GPS can reveal your position if you're lost or record every step you take so you can find your way back. Also, if you know the co-ordinates of a destination, anywhere in the world, it will show you how to get there on foot.

All the models CHOICE tested work by collecting information from a group of at least 24 satellites that constantly orbit the earth. A fix on three satellites is all you need to get a 2D position, with a fourth needed to calculate height. So unless you're inside a building or at either the North or South Pole, any of these products will help you find your place in the world.

Unlike some of the latest mobile phones with inbuilt GPS features, these units don't need a mobile phone network to work, and unlike a car navigation device, they don't need an electronic map to be useful.

A handheld GPS continually monitors its own position and speed, ready to give you information on where you've been while you were carrying it and which way you should go.

All the units tested are portable and designed to be carried for extended hikes. The compact MAGELLAN and GARMIN models are similar in size to a ruggedised mobile phone, with several small buttons and a joystick. The LOWRANCE units are larger, with a bigger screen and wider buttons.

Saving a waypoint — such as a river crossing, interesting rock formation or even hard-to-find bookstore — is an ideal way to record route markers or points of interest when you're out walking — simply press a button or two on the unit. If you want it to record the entire journey, a tracking feature creates a snail-trail that evolves as you move. Once a track is created, you can save it as a route to use later or to guide you back to your original position.

All the models except the GARMIN eTrex Legend also have an alarm to let you know when you've arrived back at the starting position and to alert you if you move too far off the saved path.

Mapping at home and in the field

All the models came with a basic world map, but to get a detailed electronic Australian topographic map you'll have to shell out a bit more cash.

For the MAGELLAN eXplorist 400 and 500LE, the only option is the DiscoverAus Topo SD map, which isn't cheap at around $400, although it does provide impressive contour details, which are accurate to 5 m. The Tracks4Australia ($180 with 20 m contour intervals) or Topo Plus ($129 with 10 m contour intervals) maps can be used with the GARMIN models. The LOWRANCE models have some fantastic US topographic maps — but that's not much help for us down in Australia.

Electronic topographic maps are contained on a removable flash memory card and provide very good detail on surrounding areas and contours, but the small screens of the MAGELLAN and GARMIN units made it difficult to gain a wider view of the area. Higher-resolution screens on the GARMIN eTrex Legend Cx and eTrex Vista Cx and MAGELLAN eXplorist 500LE provided the best readability of the compact units.

Both the LOWRANCE and GARMIN models claim support for additional marine navigation maps for those with a nautical bent. These give good depth information as well as details of buoys, lighthouses and anchorages. >

Did you know?

- Google Earth (http://earth.google.com) accepts latitude and longitude figures to zoom straight to any spot on earth. So you can just enter stored waypoints from your handheld GPS to show lucky friends spots along your last trek. If you have a MAGELLAN or GARMIN and want to take the experience further, Google Earth Plus (annual subscription $20) allows you to export tracks from your GPS onto Google Earth, such as a treacherous ravine crossing in Kosciusko National Park or a perhaps even more treacherous literary pub crawl in Dublin. Connect your GPS to the PC, upload your route information and the complete journey will be shown on a Google Earth map for all to see.
- Soon after it was created, the civilian GPS was doctored by the US government, which incorporated an artificial inaccuracy (up to 100 m) to counter any potential terrorist threat.
- Bill Clinton removed this restriction in 2000, arguing that the public good to be gained through using as accurate a system as possible would outweigh any security concerns. However, the US government still reserves the right to introduce selective availability if it feels its national interests are threatened — for example, during the war in Iraq, where the civilian GPS has been made inoperable within the war zone.

What to buy

GARMIN eTrex Vista Cx

PRICE $599

GOOD POINTS

- High-resolution colour screen.
- Compact.
- Easy to use with one hand (left or right).
- Barometer/altimeter information to help predict changing weather patterns.

BAD POINTS

- Small screen.

GARMIN eTrex Legend Cx

PRICE $499

GOOD POINTS

- High-resolution colour screen.
- Compact.
- Easy to use with one hand (left or right).

BAD POINTS

- Small screen.

MAGELLAN eXplorist 500LE

PRICE $650

GOOD POINTS

- High-resolution colour screen.
- Compact.
- Comes with an OK map of Australia.
- Uses either a rechargeable Li-Ion battery or three AAA batteries.

BAD POINTS

- Small buttons and screen.
- Joystick use not intuitive.

GARMIN eTrex Legend

PRICE $299

GOOD POINTS

- Compact
- Easy to use with one hand (left or right).

BAD POINTS

- Small monochrome screen.
- No PC mapping software supplied.

About the rest

- If you have large hands, or are off to a colder climate and plan on using the GPS with gloves on, a larger unit like one of the LOWRANCE models could be a good option.
- All the LOWRANCEs and the MAGELLAN eXplorist 400 and 210 lost points for letting in water — see *Waterproofing issues*, page 55, for more on this.

A PORTABLE WEATHER STATION

We also had a quick look at the SILVA Multi-Navigator. It has no mapping capabilities, but has a very good electronic compass and can indicate not only the barometric pressure but also the rate of change — effectively giving you a portable weather station. It has worse battery performance than the other models because it constantly collects barometric pressure information, even when turned off. Our tester found it to be very robust in the field, although some of the wilderness rescue panel found it unintuitive to use.

HOW WE TESTED

PHOTO COURTESY OF DENIS GALLAGHER

- **Accuracy** was assessed by testing the devices at four survey points and a variety of altitudes. The test was repeated twice at different times of day when a different constellation of satellites would be within range. Our testers also carried out a '10-minute' test, in which the units were left for 10 minutes at one waypoint. This test determines whether having more time to communicate with the satellites produced a more accurate reading.
- For **acquisition**, our tester measured how long each model took to acquire a satellite fix under a clear sky and then under dense foliage. Three runs of each test were carried out on different days and at different times to provide a variety of satellite constellations.
- For the **battery test**, each unit was set up to constantly fix its position and then checked every hour until its batteries ran out or it shut itself down with a low battery indication.
- **Ease of use testing** was conducted in two stages. First, the Bushwalkers Wilderness Rescue Squad examined each model, plotted a simple route and then followed the track log to gauge its accuracy. This was followed by an assessment conducted by CHOICE, which included starting the unit, logging a waypoint or route and general usability with regard to button accessibility and screen readability. The ease of use score was based on the CHOICE assessment modified by the feedback from the Bushwalkers Wilderness Rescue Squad.
- Models that claimed **waterproofing** to IPX7 standards were submerged to a depth of 1 m for 30 minutes. They were then dried and turned on to obtain a fix.
- **Ruggedness** was tested by dropping the units four times from a height of 93 cm onto a linoleum-covered hard surface.

Jargonbuster @*!?

Acquisition The ability to find and lock onto satellite signals to determine position.
Fix A successful connection with a group of orbiting satellites.
GPS Global Positioning System.
Grid A co-ordinate system that projects the earth as a flat surface, using square zones to show position information.
Topographic map Shows elevation through the use of contour lines and altitude markings.
Waypoint or POI (point of interest) An exact co-ordinate marked to show a position.

USING THE TABLE

Scores The overall score is made up of:

- Ease of use: 50%
- Battery life: 15%
- Accuracy: 15%
- Acquisition: 10%
- Waterproofing: 10%

TABLE NOTES

ns Not stated

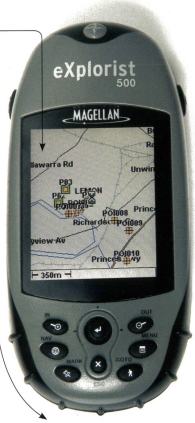
What to look for

SCREEN

A high-resolution screen, preferably colour, is necessary if you want to use detailed topographical maps.

OTHER FEATURES

- A battery compartment that accepts standard batteries (AA or AAA) means you can use either rechargeable or normal alkalines in an emergency.
- PC mapping software allows you to select a waypoint or route at home and download it to your GPS to use in the field.
- A connectivity cable allows your GPS to connect to a PC to download and upload information. But beware; these cables can be expensive if they use a proprietary connection.



EASE OF USE

The GPS needs to be comfortable in your hand, with well-spaced buttons that allow you to select functions more easily.

PRODUCT	PERFORMANCE						SPECIFICATIONS
Brand	Overall score (%)	Ease of use score (%)	Battery life score (%)	Accuracy score (%)	Acquisition score (%)	Waterproofing score (%)	PC software supplied
Garmin eTrex Vista Cx*	83	84	90	75	63	100	Mapsource 6.11.6
Garmin eTrex Legend Cx	81	83	90	70	53	100	Mapsource 6.10.2
Magellan eXplorist 500LE	78	81	70	70	68	100	MapSend Lite 2.00e beta, Magellan Conversion Manager 1.07, Magellan Geocache Manager 1.07
Garmin eTrex Legend	77	78	80	70	55	100	None
Garmin GPSmap60	74	75	80	70	40	100	Mapsource 6.10.2
Lowrance iFinder H_20c	71	79	75	60	60	50	None
Magellan eXplorist 400	71	74	75	70	73	50	MapSend Lite 2.00e beta, Magellan Conversion Manager 1.07, Magellan Geocache Manager 1.07
Magellan eXplorist 210	69	71	75	70	65	50	MapSend Lite 1.00, Mapsend Manager
Lowrance iFinder Expedition C	67	79	70	65	75	0	None
Lowrance iFinder H_20	67	76	70	75	75	0	None

< You can also use a map program on a PC to set waypoints and routes at home before you head out, and if you want to show off what a hardy bushwalker you are, you can upload routes back to a map on a PC to show where you've been. All the units can use mapping software on a PC, but while it's standard on most, it's an optional extra for the LOWRANCE and GARMIN eTrex models.

All the models performed accurately when getting a fix on the required number of satellites, with differences ranging from around 3 m for the GARMIN eTrex Vista Cx, to 12 m for the LOWRANCE iFinder H_2Oc. A wider range was observed when trying to calculate altitude; however, it's generally more important to know where you are than how high you are.

Under a clear sky, no GPS took longer than a minute to locate their position. However, when confronted with dense foliage, they varied in the time taken to get a fix, with the GARMIN GPSmap60 the only one to fail to do so within five minutes.

The MAGELLAN eXplorist 400 and 500LE were the only models with a rechargeable Li-Ion battery, which initially caused concern among our wilderness rescuers due to the inability to get spares out in the field. However, a AAA battery adapter that comes standard in the box was seen as a good all-round solution.

All the other models can use either rechargeable AAs or normal alkaline AA batteries.

While a handheld GPS provides very accurate recordings of individual waypoints and treks, we recommend carrying and learning to use a compass and paper topographical map as backup for anything longer than a short hike.

Waterproofing issues

Despite claims of being waterproof, two of the LOWRANCES, the iFinder Expedition C and iFinder H_2O, failed our immersion test. The LOWRANCE iFinder H_2Oc passed but had some water in its battery compartment.

The MAGELLAN eXplorist 400 also had water in its battery compartment, which caused it to flatten, but it was fine when the battery was recharged. The MAGELLAN 210 also let water in here but its battery didn't flatten.

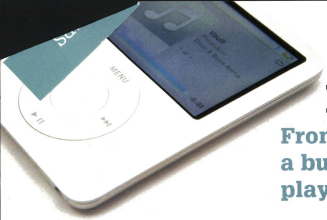
The eight models that passed the water test all passed our drop test too.

When we contacted LOWRANCE about its models failing their stated waterproof claims, the company responded: "We have encountered some inconsistency with one of the vendors that supplied the sealing agent for this product. R & D (at Lowrance) has identified the issue and a correction is in place."

If you own one of the LOWRANCE models in this test and think they haven't met their claims to the IPX7 waterproof standard (see *How we tested*), call its service department on 1300 784 244. ■

Despite claims of being waterproof, two of the Lowrances failed our immersion test. The company says "a correction is in place".

	Cable supplied	Dimensions (mm, H x W x D)	Weight (g)	No. and type of batteries	Display size (mm, W x H)	Display resolution (pixels, W x H)	Display type	High-resolution display	Contact	Price ($)
i-B USB/USB 2.0 Type A	√	106 x 58 x 32	173	2 x AA	34 x 43	176 x 220	Colour	√	www.garmin.com.au	599
i-B USB/USB 2.0 Type A	√	106 x 58 x 32	170	2 x AA	33 x 43	176 x 220	Colour	√	www.garmin.com.au	499
prietary/USB 2.0 Type A	√	119 x 55 x 33	152	1 x Li-ion or 3 x AAA	34 x 43	122 x 160	Colour	√	www.magellangps.com	650
prietary/serial port	√	113 x 57 x 32	155	2 x AA	29 x 51	160 x 288	Mono		www.garmin.com.au	299
i-B USB/USB 2.0 Type A	√	159 x 58 x 34	204	2 x AA	35 x 53	160 x 240	Mono		www.garmin.com.au	529
prietary/serial port		149 x 68 x 31	245	2 x AA	43 x 57	240 x 320	Colour	√	www.lowrance.com.au	649
prietary/USB 2.0 Type A	√	119 x 55 x 33	156	1 x Li-ion or 3 x AAA	34 x 46	122 x 160	Mono		www.magellangps.com	550
prietary/USB 2.0 Type A	√	119 x 55 x 33	167	2 x AA	34 x 45	122 x 160	Mono		www.magellangps.com	420
prietary/serial port		149 x 68 x 31	249	2 x AA	43 x 57	240 x 320	Colour	√	www.lowrance.com.au	729
rietary/serial port		149 x 68 x 31	253	2 x AA	41 x 54	180 x 240	Mono		www.lowrance.com.au	419



Playing your song

From as big as a postcard to as small as a button — there's even a digital music player perfect for lap swimmers.

nutshell

- Do you want a player small enough to clip onto your clothes? Or a model that can handle your entire music collection, videos and photos too?
- Size still matters — generally the heavier and bulkier the player, the more storage, features and functionality it has.

For music on the go, it's horses for courses. The range of digital players (MP3 players) on the market today caters to a wide range of interests and needs. To work out which one will suit you best, consider how and where you want to use it.

If you like to watch videos and store and display digital photos as well as listen to music, a hard disc model with a large screen is just the ticket. If you like plenty of music but prefer something that fits into your pocket, a medium-sized flash player will work best. For the sporty types (and in one instance the water babies — see *Water music*, right) an extra-small flash model can be clipped to your clothes and will allow you to you move without missing a beat.

CHOICE tested 14 digital music players this time around: 12 flash and two hard drive models, ranging in price from $40 to $500. While some of the models reviewed in our last test in CHOICE, September 2007, may still be available, we haven't included them in the table as we've changed the way we tested battery life. The latest iPOD Classic hard drive player wasn't included as the new model wasn't released in time for our test — and if you're interested in the new iPOD Touch, stay tuned for a quick review coming up next issue.

Water music

Love to swim but get bored watching those black lines at the bottom of the pool? Maybe a waterproof MP3 player is the way to go. The NU Dolphin is a tiny barrel-shaped digital player that can be clipped onto your swimming goggles. Our tester and avid lap swimmer found it kept him well entertained in the water, after some initial playing around with the earphones to keep them firmly in.

However, while the NU Dolphin works a treat in the water, its limited functionality, below average sound quality, no screen and very short earphone leads (designed to be worn on swimming goggles) mean it doesn't have as much appeal for landlubbers. You can see what it looks like in the photo on page 58.

Another interesting item for sporty types is the NIKE + iPOD Sport Kit, a product that allows the iPOD to communicate with the wearer's running shoe. We've done a quick review of this new product on page 9. >

What to look for

THINGS TO CHECK

- **Compatibility** If you use a Mac or an older PC, check that the player and its software are compatible with your computer.
- **File types supported** If you want to use your player for things other than listening to music, check whether it supports the relevant file types — there's a comprehensive list online at choice.com.au. The most common file format for photos is JPG; for video, it's AVI.

Larger screen
This is useful if you've got lots of music to organise, or want to store and view photos and video. If you want to use a player to watch movies or display your photos, only the largest models are likely to be useful.

Rechargeable battery
Some of the players in the test use AAA batteries (rechargeable or otherwise). Most have a built-in rechargeable battery pack that you can recharge from your computer's USB port or from an AC adapter. Batteries generally charge faster from an AC adapter than from a USB port. The table (page 58) lists which players can still be used while they're recharging.

What to buy

For good sound that's easy to carry

If you just want to listen to music on a machine with great sound, go for one of these two.

APPLE iPod Nano

PRICE $199
STORAGE TYPE Flash
CAPACITY 4 GB
GOOD POINTS
- Very easy to set up and use.
- Very easy to transfer music to the player.
- Can be used while recharging via USB.

BAD POINTS
- No inbuilt microphone (for voice recording).
- No provision for a clip or a strap.

PHILIPS Go Gear SA6045

PRICE $240
STORAGE TYPE Flash
CAPACITY 4 GB
GOOD POINTS
- Very easy to set up and use.
- Very easy to transfer music to the player.

BAD POINTS
- The labels of the main controls are hard to see.

For music buffs

If you're a music buff and want to listen to your entire collection, the CREATIVE Zen Vision: M is great. Unfortunately it's been discontinued and may be hard to find in shops.

CREATIVE Zen Vision: M

PRICE $450
STORAGE TYPE Hard drive
CAPACITY 60 GB
GOOD POINTS
- Line-out socket allows recording/output to another device.
- Relatively large screen.
- Very easy to set up for use.
- AC adapter for mains charging (sold separately).

BAD POINTS
- Status icons are difficult to understand and the software shortens the names of long music tracks.
- No provision for a clip or a strap.

For photos and video

When vision is as important as sound.

CREATIVE Zen Vision W New Edition/'Slim'

PRICE $500
STORAGE TYPE Hard drive
CAPACITY 60 GB
GOOD POINTS
- Line-out socket allows recording/output to another device.
- Very large screen suitable for viewing photos and video.
- Very easy to set up.
- AC adapter for mains charging

BAD POINTS
- Status icons are difficult to understand and the software shortens the names of long music tracks.
- No provision for a clip or a strap.
- Too large to fit into a pocket.

You're also likely to be happy with some of the models that aren't in the *What to buy* list — especially if you find them for a good price.

About the rest

You're likely to be happy with some of the models that aren't in the *What to buy* list as well — especially if you find them at a good price. However:

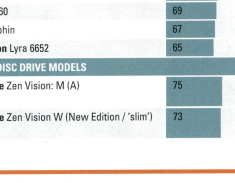
- Several of them have labels and icons that are more difficult to read than on the recommended models.
- The COWON and THOMSON Lyra 6652 have frustrating and difficult-to-use software.
- The LENOXX and the LASER were pulled down by their ratings in the listening test (part of the sound quality score).
- The PHILIPS GoGear SA3125, while very easy to set up and use, is quite tricky to turn off.
- The SAMSUNG YP-K3JA is fiddly, as all controls are operated by the touch panel.
- Battery life is an issue for some players, mainly the IRIVER and NU.

PHOTOGRAPHY: GENE RUSS

PRODUCT	PERFORMANCE					FEATURES				SPECIFICATIONS		
Brand / model (in rank order within groups)	Overall score (%)	Ease of use score (%)	Sound quality score (%)	Battery score (%)*	Best measured battery life (hours:minutes)	Playback while recharging (AC / USB)	Mac-compatible	FM radio	JPG display	Dimensions (mm, H x W x D)	Screen size (mm, W x H)	Weight (g)
FLASH-BASED MODELS												
Apple iPod Nano	85	81	87	91	26:12	na / √	√		√	70 x 52 x 7	41 x 31	48
Philips GoGear SA6045	83	84	84	79	17:24	na / ×		√	√	53 x 93 x 11	44 x 33	76
Cowon iAUDIO7	80	69	82	100	52:17	na / ×	√	√	√	32 x 76 x 19	27 x 22	52
Samsung YP-K3JA	79	72	84	85	21:55	na / ×		√	√	96 x 45 x 7	29 x 36	53
Sony NWDB105F	78	83	84	58	8:11	na / ×	√	√		25 x 90 x 17	25 x 8	30
Samsung YP-U3JQ	77	83	79	62	9:24	na / ×		√		26 x 79 x 11	22 x 11	26
Philips GoGear SA3125	76	86	70	69	12:28	na / ×	√	√	√	79 x 41 x 10	30 x 36	47
Laser MVP2	73	73	68	84	20:34	√ / √	√	√	√	80 x 42 x 14	30 x 36	48
Lenoxx MP3-150	71	81	62	67	11:23	na / na	√			32 x 100 x 22	30 x 9	36
iriver T60	69	79	69	50	11:08	na / na	√	√		22 x 65 x 21	21 x 11	35
Nu Dolphin	67	77	67	48	5:36	× / √	√			20 x 61 x 20	No screen	27
Thomson Lyra 6652	65	77	55	59	8:18	na / na	√	√		29 x 78 x 19	25 x 10	37
HARD DISC DRIVE MODELS												
Creative Zen Vision: M (A)	75	69	87	62	9:29	(B) / ×		√	√	104 x 62 x 21	52 x 39	162
Creative Zen Vision W (New Edition / 'slim')	73	65	86	64	10:07	√ / ×		√	√	77 x 135 x 24	96 x 55	276

UNDERWATER MUSIC

Clip the NU Dolphin to your swimming goggles and away you go. But its design (and below-average sound quality) mean you couldn't easily use it in other circumstances.



USING THE TABLE

Scores The overall score is made up of:

- Ease of use: 40%
- Sound quality: 40%
- Battery life: 20%

Battery life scores are calculated so that a player that averages 36 hours or more gets 100% and one that lasts six hours gets 50%.
Playback while recharging means it's possible to listen to your music while the player is connected to mains power or your PC and recharging.
Mac-compatible Other than the Apple iPod, some players' functionality may be reduced compared with use on a PC.
Capacity is in gigabytes — 2 GB can store around 500 songs of average length
Software supplied Apple iPods use iTunes, which can be downloaded free from the Apple website; other players without specific software can also use iTunes or Windows Media Player.
Price Recommended retail, as of October 2007.

TABLE NOTES

** Based on at least two tests.*
na Not applicable: can't be recharged this way.
ns Not stated
(A) Discontinued, but may still be available in some shops.
(B) Via an adapter, which is sold separately.

Battery	Supplied software	Minimum Windows PC system requirements	Contact	Price ($)
1 x Li-ion	None	XP	www.apple.com.au	199
1 x Li-polymer	Philips Device Manager 1.1.1, Philips Media Converter 2.02.67, Windows Media Player 11	XP SP2	www.philips.com.au	240
1 x Li-ion	Cowon Media Centre Jetaudio Basic VX	98SE	www.cowon.com	294
1 x Li-ion	Samsung Media Studio 5.1.5	XP SP2	www.samsung.com/au	179
1 x Li-ion	None	2000Pro SP4	www.sony.com.au	119
1 x Li-ion	Samsung Media Studio 5.1.4.3	XP SP2	www.samsung.com/au	119
1 x Li-polymer	Philips Device Manager 1.02, Philips Media Converter 1.01	2000	www.philips.com.au	140
ns	MP3 Player Utilities 4.00	98	www.laserco.net	80
1 x AAA	Win98 drivers	98	www.lenoxx.com	70
1 x AAA	iriver plus 3.3.0.2, Windows Media Player 11	98SE	www.iriver.com	99
ns	None	2000	www.nu-global.com	165
1 x AAA	None	98SE	www.thomson-lyra.com	40
1 x Li-ion	Zen Vision:M Media Explorer 5.21.06, Creative MediaSource 5.01.25, Windows Media Player 10, Audible Manager 5.0.0.5	XP SP1	www.creative.com	450
	Windows Media	XP SP1	www.creative.com	500

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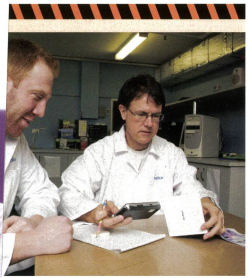


CHOICE's testers checked sound quality, ease of use and battery life.

On the big(ish) screen

Size isn't always the most important aspect of a TV. So you'll be happy with most of the LCD models in this range.

nutshell

- Good news: the picture quality is still improving.
- Two of the 12 tested models don't have an inbuilt digital tuner — with the phase-out of analogue TV only a few years away, there's no excuse for this any more.

They might not be quite big enough for some television connoisseurs, but if you don't want an entire wall in your living room taken up by a jumbo TV, an 80 cm model is a very 'livable' size, and the tested models deliver a crisp image.

For this report, CHOICE tested 12 LCD flatscreen televisions costing under $2500. As usual, we looked at their ease of use, picture and sound quality, and energy while on standby. The good news is that picture quality keeps improving, and to keep pace our scoring is a little tougher on the TVs than previously — and they took it pretty well. There's also an increasing number of features with the newer models, so you're getting better value for money.

The top three TVs all scored over 70% for picture quality, and none of the other models was disappointingly bad — you could be happy with almost all of them.

On the downside, both the SONY and TOSHIBA Regza 32WL68A don't have an inbuilt digital tuner, which we think is inexcusable now the phase-out of analogue broadcasting is only a few years away. We penalise the lack of a tuner in the ease of use score. Fortunately it seems the other manufacturers are catching on.

Fine features

While they can't quite pick your kids up from school yet, some models have extra features that may make them attractive, depending on what you expect from your TV.

- The HITACHI's screen can be swivelled using the remote control — the ultimate in features for the lazy.
- The LG, TCL and PHILIPS have a USB connection, so you can watch images and play MP3s stored on your computer or camera. The PHILIPS lets you watch MPEG1 and MPEG2 videos, the TCL MPEG4. It also has a USB printer port to connect to a photo printer.
- The top-scoring PANASONIC Viera TX-32LXD700A has an SD card slot that lets you connect up your digital camera's SD card and watch your happy snaps on the big screen without downloading them first.

Energy use

We measured standby energy and energy in use for each TV; the GRUNDIG used the most for both. All the other models used far less energy on standby, so it seems manufacturers are learning. If you want to reduce your carbon dioxide emissions and save money, go for one of the more efficient models. >

PRODUCT	PERFORMANCE						FEATURES			
Brand / model (in rank order)	Overall score (%)	Picture quality score (%)	Sound quality score (%)	Ease of use score (%)	Standby energy score (%)	Energy consumption when in use (W)	Swivel	Previous channel	USB port / SD card slot	Tuner type
Panasonic Viera TX-32LXD700A	78	79	70	78	90	138	√		SD	A,H
Panasonic Viera TX-32LXD70A	76	75	70	77	90	130				A,H
Toshiba Regza 32C3000A	73	71	70	70	90	153	√	√		A,H
LG 32LB9D-AD	66	63	50	76	90	124	√	√	USB	A,H
Hitachi 32LD960DTA (A)	65	55	70	73	90	149	√ (B)			A,H
Sony Bravia KLV-32V300A (A)	65	68	60	43	100	146		√		A
Toshiba Regza 32WL68A	64	63	70	45	90	156	√	√		A
Samsung LA32R81BD	63	60	50	68	90	154	√	√		A,H
Philips 32PFL7532D/79	62	60	55	59	90	99	√	√	USB	A,H
Sharp Aquos LC-32PD5X	59	60	40	60	90	136		√		A,H
TCL L32M61AZ	59	57	50	56	90	152		√	USB (C)	A,H
Grundig Cinemo GLCD3200HD	57	56	55	62	60	172	√	√		A,H

What to buy

PANASONIC Viera TX-32LXD700A

PRICE $1999

GOOD POINTS

- Good picture and sound quality.
- Very easy to use the remote control and easy to use the menu.
- Inbuilt high-definition tuner.
- The remote can also control a PANASONIC DVD player.
- The screen can be swivelled manually.
- Headphone connection.
- SD card slot.

BAD POINTS

- No manual fine-tuning for analogue channels.
- No 'previous channel' function.

PANASONIC Viera TX-32LXD70A

PRICE $1759

GOOD POINTS

- Good picture and sound quality.
- Easy to use the remote control and the menu.
- Inbuilt high-definition tuner.
- The remote can also control a PANASONIC DVD player.
- Headphone connection.

BAD POINTS

- No manual fine-tuning for analogue channels.
- No 'previous channel' function.

TOSHIBA Regza 32C3000A

PRICE $1699

GOOD POINTS

- Good picture and sound quality.
- The remote can also control a TOSHIBA DVD player.
- Inbuilt high-definition tuner.
- The screen can be swivelled manually.
- Headphone connection.

BAD POINTS

- You have to attach the screen to the base yourself.

An 80 cm television is a very 'livable' size in a smaller room — it won't dominate a whole wall.

CIFICATIONS

(cm, H x W x D)	Contact	Price ($)
x 768	59.5 x 83.5 x 25	www.panasonic.com.au	1999
x 768	61.5 x 79 x 24	www.panasonic.com.au	1759
x 768	59 x 80 x 29.5	www.toshibaav.com.au	1699
	62 x 80.5 x 28.5	www.lge.com.au	1699
x 768	65.5 x 82.5 x 36.5	www.hitachi.com.au	2199
x 768	58.5 x 79 x 21.5	www.sony.com.au	1499
x 768	60 x 79.5 x 31	www.toshibaav.com.au	1499
	58.5 x 80 x 25.5	www.samsung.com.au	1649
	61.5 x 80.5 x 21.5	www.philips.com.au	1600
x 768	59 x 79.5 x 25	www.sharp.net.au	1749
	62 x 81.5 x 22	www.tclelectronics.com.au	1499
	64.5 x 81 x 23.5	www.grundig-australia.com	2199

USING THE TABLE

Scores The overall score is a combination of:

- Picture quality: 50%
- Sound quality: 20%
- Ease of use: 20%
- Energy consumption on standby: 10%

Tuner type See *What to look for*, page 62, for more on this. If there's only an analogue tuner you'll need to buy a set-top box to receive digital TV.

- A: Analogue.
- H: High-definition digital.

Price Recommended retail, as of October 2007.

TABLE NOTES

ns: Not stated.
(A) Discontinued, but may still be available in some shops.
(B) Operated by the remote control.
(C) Also has a USB printer port.

About the rest

- While the LG and HITACHI are both easy to use, the LG was let down by its sound and the HITACHI by its picture.
- The SONY and TOSHIBA Regza 32WL68A don't have an inbuilt digital tuner; on the plus side, though, the SONY has the top standby energy score.
- The SAMSUNG, PHILIPS, TCL and GRUNDIG all scored only 50%–55% for sound quality. The PHILIPS' picture also has a greenish tone, though it uses the least electricity when is use.
- The SHARP has poor sound quality — it's tinny and has practically no bass.
- The GRUNDIG has mediocre scores all round, and uses 4 W of energy on standby, which we think is too high.

What to look for

A USB or SD card slot may be handy for displaying still images from your digital camera.
Look for easy-to-use sockets that allow you easy access to the connections for DVD recorder, cable TV and so on.
Look for a remote control that's easy to read with large, well-spaced buttons and clear labels.

PHOTOGRAPHY: GENE ROSS

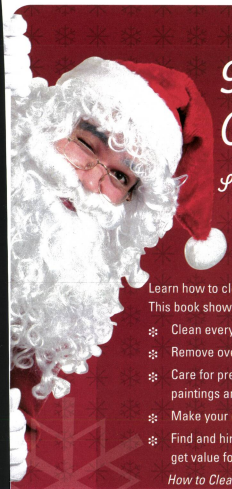
IN THE SHOP

- Check how the picture looks if you step to the side or move up and down. Viewing angles have improved in newer models, but some still have a dimmer picture when viewed from different angles. It's important the picture looks consistent from all angles if several people are watching TV at once.
- Try to watch a variety of TV programs in the shop. In particular, look for natural skin tones on a person in a studio setting, such as a news presenter.
- Also check the picture for a colour 'cast', such as a pinkish or greenish tinge that can't be completely fixed by adjusting the controls.
- Check for a built-in digital tuner so you don't have to buy a set-top box as well in order to receive digital TV. For most people it won't matter whether the tuner is standard-definition (SD) or high-definition (HD) at the moment, as there's not a lot of HDTV being broadcast, but there'll be more in future. There's no point buying an HD tuner if your screen is only SD, but all the screens of the tested TVs are high-definition.
- If you've got small children, the 'child lock' feature enables specific channels to be disabled or locks the front panel buttons.
- Check that the input connections on the TV match the output on the devices you want to hook up to it (DVD player/recorder, cable TV, PlayStation, for example), and that there are enough connections for all the devices you want to attach at the same time.
- HDMI (high-definition multimedia interface) is an all-digital connection for both sound and video in one cable. You may not have any gadgets with HDMI output at the moment, but we expect more to use them in the future, so it might be worth looking out for a TV with at least one HDMI socket.
- If you want to use your TV as a computer display, you'll need one with a DVI input for newer computers or a VGA input for older ones. An HDMI socket will do if your computer has an HDMI output, but not many do at the moment. DVI-to-HDMI adapters are quite cheap.
- If you're likely to lose the remote, choose a model with easy-to-reach controls on the TV. Several in the test have the volume and channel controls on top, making them difficult to reach if it's mounted on the wall (all the tested models are wall-mountable, but none comes with the mounts.)

Picture quality keeps on improving, and there's also an increasing number of features on newer models.

HOW WE TESTED

- To check the TVs' picture and colour, our testers set up all 12 models close together and adjusted their controls to get the best picture quality possible. They kept the lighting in the room low and the sound muted, and four experts watched a variety of footage (from various movies and live TV) simultaneously on all the tested screens. They evaluated the picture quality and rated it out of 10.
- Testers checked how well each TV produces accurate colour, using a specially calibrated high-quality monitor as a reference.
- They displayed a number of test patterns from a high-quality DVD player, to measure if any of the picture was being cut off at the edges and to check for any distortions (such as circles that aren't round, or wavy lines that should be straight).
- They played movies and other footage to check the screen's ability to produce images without colour-banding, jerkiness, blurring, vibration and colours bleeding in high contrast or very intensely saturated parts of the image. They also checked that there were no trails behind fast-moving objects on the screen.
- They listened to both movies and music to check for rattles, hums, hisses or distortion, as well as making a judgment on how well the high and low sounds were produced.
- To see how easy the TVs are to operate, testers used the remote control, front panel controls and onscreen display to perform a number of common tasks. They looked for clear labelling, buttons and controls that are easily identified and can be used without interfering with other controls, and logical menus. Whether the TV had an inbuilt digital tuner was also included in the ease of use score.
- Finally they used a power meter to measure the power the TV uses on standby and in use.



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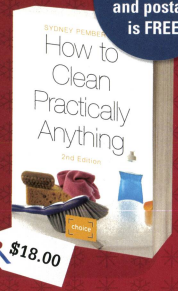

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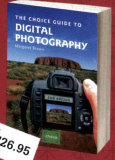

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Nowadays there are so many product recalls we may not be able to print all of them in CHOICE. For comprehensive recall information go to the Product Recalls Australia website: www.recalls.gov.au. If you don't have web access, call the Product Safety Policy section of the ACCC on 02 6243 1262.

Companies often rent 1800 numbers for a couple of months after a recall is announced. If the number given is no longer operating, phone the manufacturer or retailer direct.

Safety Alert

PORTABLE COT ■ Born with Style has recalled **Jeep Sahara portable cot**, manufactured between 2001 and 2007, model numbers 55234–XC, 55237–JQ, 77234T–XC and 77237T–JQ. They were sold through specialty baby stores and Baby Target.
The problem When a child is placed in the cot with the change table in place, the child can become caught in a looped restraint strap that hangs below the changing table, posing a strangulation hazard.
What to do Stop using it, or always remove the changing table attachment from the cot before placing an infant in the cot. Call Born with Style to request a replacement non-looped strap on 02 9816 3837.

FOOD ■ Woolworths has recalled **Woolworths Apricot Choc Cookies**, 360 g, packed in a green bag with a clear window, and a best-before date of 12 July 08.
The problem Some packs contain peanut brownies instead of apricot choc cookies, posing a risk to those allergic to peanuts.
What to do Don't eat them if you have a peanut allergy. Return them to your nearest Woolworths, Safeway or Food For Less supermarket for a refund, or for more information call 1800 638 434.

FOOD ■ Bega Co-Operative Society has recalled **Bega So Extra Light 50% Less Fat Grated Cheese**, 600 g plastic bag, use by 28 MAR 08 AG, sold in Woolworths and Safeway supermarkets.
The problem It may contain plastic fragments.
What to do Don't eat it. Return it to the place of purchase for a refund, or for more information call 1800 814 150.

COT MATTRESS ■ IGC Dorel has recalled **Mothers Choice Inner Spring Cot Mattress**, 690 x 1300 x 130 mm, sold with the Kensington cot through Kmart since 16 August 2007.
The problem The mattress may be undersized when fitted in the cot, leaving a gap between the mattress and the side of the cot that exceeds the 40 mm allowed by the Australian standard.
What to do Don't use it. Contact IGC Dorel on 1300 809 526 to arrange for a free replacement mattress, or go to www.igcdorel.com.au.

BED ■ Australian Discount Retail has recalled **Kids Bunk Bed DB/SB**, product number 489509333130, sold in 'The Warehouse — Where Everyone Gets a Bargain' between 6 September 2007 and 13 September 2007.
The problem The bed doesn't meet certain requirements of the Australian standard.
What to do Return it to the place of purchase for a refund, call 1800 254 687 or email merchandise.compliance@adrt.com.au.

BED ■ Australian Discount Retail has recalled **Kids Bunk Bed Matt Silver**, product number 4895090321007, sold in 'The Warehouse — Where Everyone Gets a Bargain' between 28 December 2006 and 19 September 2007.
The problem The bed doesn't meet certain requirements of the Australian standard.
What to do Return it to the place of purchase for a refund, call 1800 254 687 or email merchandise.compliance@adrt.com.au.

TOYS ■ Toymonster Limited has recalled **Eezy Peezy Slide**, 1.5 m, and **Eezy Peezy Slide** 1.8 m, item number EP070101, manufactured between April 2007 and September 2007, and sold since April 2007.
The problem The red plastic slide component may become fragile under extreme weather conditions and extended use, possibly fracturing and causing injury.
What to do Remove it from the use of children. Contact Future Logistics on 1300 307 712 or go to www.toymonster.com to arrange for a refund.

TOYS ■ Modern Brands has recalled the following **Viking Toys**, **Mini Chubbie vehicles**: SUV, Pickup Truck, Jeep, Sportscar, Coupe, Ambulance, Fire Truck, Limo, Van, Tipper Truck, Tractor with Digger, Truck with Digger, Plane — Traditional, Helicopter, Plane — Jetliner, Trailer, (all product numbers VP7110/VP1115), Viking — Mini Chubbie Planes Gift Box (VP81118), Viking — Mini Chubbies Gift Box (VP81119), Viking — Mini Chubbies Pastel Gift Box (VP81129), Viking — Ferry Boat with Mini Cars (VP1099) and Viking — Multiplay Water Play Set (VP5000). Only toys with wheel rims of 20 mm in diameter are affected. They were sold between 14 May 2007 and 6 September 2007, and are labelled 'Viking Toys Sweden. Made in Thailand'.
The problem The tyres may separate from the wheel rim.
What to do Remove from the reach of children. To obtain a refund go to www.modernbrands.com.au, email vikingrecall@modernbrands.com.au or phone 1800 675 772 and select option 3, between Monday and Friday, 8 am to 5 pm (EST).

TOYS ■ RC2 Australia, trading as Learning Curve Australia, has recalled the following **Thomas & Friends Wooden Railway Toys**: Black Cargo Car (sold only in Brendham Fishing Dock), Item LC99362, APN 796714993621; Toad Vehicle with Brake Lever (only products with tracking code 16560W000), item LC99027, APN796714990279; Olive Green Sodor Cargo Box (sold only in Deluxe Cranky the Crane set), item LC99371, APN 796714993713; Green Maple Tree Top and Green Signal Base (sold only in Conductors Figure 8 Sets), item LC99535, APN 796714995359. The Conductors Figure 8 set was included in a previous recall and may already have been returned to RC2.
The problem The toys may have been coated in paint containing potentially unsafe levels of lead.
What to do Remove them from the reach of children. Go to www.rc2aust.com.au and download the recall return form or email recallinfo@rc2aust.com.au to request the form. Return the form along with the toys via freepost to RC2 Australia, Reply Paid 140, Mt Waverley 3149, to receive a refund.

TOYS ■ Mattel has recalled the following **Barbie-branded toys**: Barbie Table & Chairs Kitchen Playset (affected items: two dinner plates, miniature dog, potato chip bowl, salad bowl), product number K8606; Barbie Bathtub & Toilet Playset (affected item: miniature cat), product number K8607; Barbie Living Room Playset (affected item: miniature cat), product number K8608; Barbie Desk & Chair Bedroom Playset (affected item: miniature dog), product number K8609; Barbie Living Room Playset (affected item: handbag), product number K8613. The items were sold between November 2006 and August 2007.
The problem The toys may be coated in paint containing lead.
What to do Remove them from the reach of children. To check if your product is affected and to obtain a refund, go to www.service.mattel.com (click through to the Australian site), email infoaust@mattel.com or call 1800 674 753, Monday to Friday, 8 am to 5 pm.

TOY ■ Mattel has recalled the **Fisher-Price Geotrax Rail & Road System Freightway Transport** (affected item: yellow headlights on train and miniature ladder), product number H5705. It was manufactured between 31 July 2006 and 4 September 2006.
The problem The toys may be coated in paint containing lead.
What to do Remove them from the reach of children. To check if your product is affected and to obtain a refund, go to www.service.mattel.com (click through to the Australian site), email infoaust@mattel.com or call 1800 674 753, Monday to Friday, 8 am to 5 pm.

TOY ■ McPherson's Consumer Products has recalled **Kids 'r' Cool Musical Fun Set**, a set of five brightly coloured plastic musical instruments, including a flute, recorder, triple horn and set of maracas, with barcode number 9316201 310886.
The problem Small parts may break off the triple horn.
What to do Remove it from the reach of children. Return it to the place of purchase for a refund, or call 1800 651 146 for more information.

ANTISEPTIC WIPES ■ The Promotional Shop has recalled **Woolworths Fresh Future Children's Hospital Appeal 2007 First Aid Kit**, all batches, ARTG number 136299. They were sold in Woolworths, Safeway and Food for Less stores from 6 August 2007.
The problem The antiseptic wipes in the kit have microbial contamination.
What to do Don't use them. Return them to the place of purchase for a refund.

+ CONSUMER AGENDA

Consumer priorities for the new government

As we went to press the result of the federal election wasn't known. But there's a clear consumer agenda for any new government. CHOICE wants action for the benefit of consumers in 10 priority areas.

To find out more about these priority consumer areas, go to choice.com.au/priorities.

1 New laws that ensure fair consumer contracts

Virtually all consumer contracts in Australia include 'standard terms'. Sometimes they're unfair, as with mobile phone contracts that let the supplier vary the costs at any time, without notice. CHOICE wants national laws to prohibit unfair contract terms and enable consumers and regulators to act against them.

2 A single national system of product safety

The product safety system in Australia is inadequate. Overlapping state and federal jurisdictions result in poor enforcement of product safety laws. CHOICE wants the Commonwealth to take responsibility for all product safety issues through an independent agency such as the ACCC, with greater powers to enforce product safety law.

3 An end to unscrupulous mortgage broking and lending practices

The state-based regulatory framework fails to protect consumers from inappropriate and predatory lending and broking practices. CHOICE wants the Commonwealth Government to take responsibility for the regulation of credit and mortgage brokers.

4 Protect children from the marketing of unhealthy food

Food advertising to children influences their food choices and undermines parents' efforts for healthier diets. CHOICE wants better regulation of food marketing to children. To date, the food and advertising industries haven't made useful changes to address childhood obesity.

5 Better health system performance reporting

Transparency about the quality and safety of the healthcare system would let consumers make better choices. And it would give a strong incentive for improvements. CHOICE wants every hospital in Australia to report publicly on key indicators, including infection rates, adverse events and surgery outcomes.

6 Investment in household energy and water efficiency

Governments need to play a greater role in helping households improve energy and water efficiency. We want a national program to promote energy efficiency, including retrofitting all homes with better insulation, fittings and appliances, within a generation.

7 Better regulation of drug marketing

Pharmaceutical companies use unethical strategies to increase use of their medicines. This isn't in consumers' interests. They want doctors to prescribe drugs based on the best independent information. CHOICE wants tighter regulation of drug marketing and higher penalties for companies that break the law.

8 Safeguard Australia's broadband future

The rush to build a faster broadband network puts its future at risk. There's been insufficient public consultation or planning to ensure continued access to high-quality broadband beyond this first upgrade. CHOICE wants a guarantee that there'll be competitive access to fairly-priced broadband in the short and long term, with technology and regulation that's future-proof.

9 Fairer bank penalty fees

Penalty fees charged by banks on transaction and credit card accounts have increased by as much as 50% in some cases in the last two years. The fees don't reflect the underlying cost to the banks. CHOICE wants the Australian Securities and Investments Commission (ASIC) to be given the power to examine penalty fees to determine if they're fair.

10 A new consumer and competition ministerial portfolio

Australian consumers are questioning the integrity of various consumer markets, including banking, energy and telecommunications. CHOICE wants the new cabinet to reprioritise the consumer interest by creating a new minister for consumers and competition. The minister would champion consumer interests across government, and modernise consumer policy to deliver fair, efficient and sustainable markets. ■

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* Indicates an update of a previous report, additions or corrections to reports, small follow-up items, letters or recalls.

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The winner of the prize for best *Hard Word* entry goes to N Haigh for the cartoon crack in the windshield. Thanks also to H Williams, C Williams, S Richardson, G & M Wright, J Bicket and N Stringer for their contributions to this month's back page of CHOICE.

If you have any examples you think deserve to be on this page, send them to *The Hard Word*, CHOICE, 57 Carrington Road, Marrickville 2204. Please don't email us your entries — we need the originals.

Does it work?

Of course it does! Just look at the cartoon — the crack has completely disappeared. Hmmm.

Nibble it, chew it, contains irresistible cat-nip …

Sounds delicious. So it's good to know that this cat litter scoop is "designed to take the most serious kind of licking your cat can muster up". What an apawling thought!

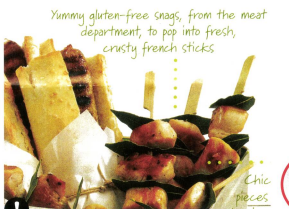
Cat Litter Scoop
This toy is made with only the finest materials It contains non-stop irresistible fun, designed to take the most serious kind of licking your cat can muster up. A sure way to keep em coming back for more!
CONTAINS irresistible CAT-NIP

Ten-year-old Scott Richardson wasn't convinced that an electric scooter was the way to "get active".

Good old global warming, eh?

So many deserts they're giving 'em away. Mitchell Wright recommends the Sahara Special.

FREE DESERT
on Mondays & Tuesdays
with any main meal ordered
Members discounts do not apply.
2 FOR 1 Roast Dinners
on Tuesday nights only. Members only.



And the 'fresh, crusty French sticks' would be gluten-free too?

Heels for the well-heeled?

Disregarding the fact that a sandal is a rather odd place to secure your credit card and other valuables, wouldn't the 'powerful magnets' wreak havoc with information stored on the card's magnetic strip?